

# 1968



Poster produced at the Beaux Arts Academy, Paris, 12th May 1968.  
feu la culture means 'culture deceased' or 'the late culture'.

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*This issue of the Raven was edited by Neil Birrell*

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## 1968 : Introduction

It seems strange in many ways to be writing an introduction to an edition of *The Raven* about a year that I am really too young to remember. In itself that suggests that the events of 1968 are now part of our common culture insofar as what is written now about that year is now being passed on from one generation to the next.

However, the events of that year seem in many ways to be more pertinent to my generation than perhaps the events of the 1930s which, here near the end of the millennium, seem very distant.

I hope the articles we include here speak for themselves but one *Chronique d'un Mouvement* requires further introduction. As I was reading some other documents which I was considering including in this edition I came across one snippet that made an impression on me. Apparently 1968 was the year, here in the UK, when for the first time more people were receiving news via the medium of their television rather than newspapers. Many of those who had some influence on what happened in that year introduced to us the notion of the spectacle one aspect of which is the notion of those who are affected by the decisions made in their name are simply passive spectators or consumers of events. Television seems to epitomise the spectacle in an acute fashion.

May 1968 is remembered as the antithesis of that. Non-stop debates at the Odéon and non-stop publishing of pamphlets and posters which were then scattered around Paris along with attendant graffiti.

Thirty years later, in the winter of 1995, France once again saw widespread strikes which blew up fast and faded almost as quickly and where the snow of December played as important a role as the warmth of May some three decades earlier.

In the same way as the students of '68 published their tracts so those involved this time sent out digital files of information over the a-infos internet news service (<http://ainfos.tao.ca>). Here we can present only a small selection of the flurry of information which was written at the time. The full archive is available at the a-infos web site. If you do visit the web site you may also wish to take a look at the special section to go with this edition of *The Raven* at <http://www.tao.ca/1968>.

No conclusions here about the similarities and differences between the two periods: we leave that to you.

Neil Birrell  
Dorset, September 1998

## Daniel Cohn-Bendit

### I am a megaphone ...

#### *St Nazaire, 18th May*

If you say the students are sons of bourgeois you are right. But a minority of them have made a complete break with their class. They are ready to join up with the workers. Where? In the street, where we can argue and can act. People talk about civil war. But on one side there are the workers, the peasants, the students, on the other the bourgeois. The bourgeois will not fight in the streets. And their police are tied down in Paris. There are not enough of them to go round. The first phase of the advanced struggle we are leading must be the occupation of the factories. Then the setting up of revolutionary councils. We must find new forms of management. We must be masters of the means of production. Equality of wages, that is very important. Wages must be equal in an egalitarian society.

It is not a question of attacking the trade union movement, but of creating the conditions for a workers' democracy, where each, whatever his slogans or his banners, can have his say. I attack the leaders of the union organisations, I do not attack the ordinary union members. Unity of the labour movement will be achieved by the young. Shop by shop the young unionists must unite. Unity won't come from the top.

#### *Frankfurt, 23rd May*

*Q: How do you describe your political position?*

A: Basically I am an anarchist ... a Marxist-anarchist.

*Q: Some journalists have described you as the leader of the revolution.*

A: Let them write their rubbish. These people will never be able to understand that the student movement doesn't need any chiefs. I am neither a leader nor a professional revolutionary. I am simply a mouthpiece, a megaphone.

*Q: What is the reason for your expulsion from France?*

A: I don't begin to understand why de Gaulle had me expelled. Can he really be so stupid?

*Q: You talk as if you have a personal hatred for General de Gaulle ...*

A: It is a tactic, naturally. Above all to defend myself against the accusations of the Party, which wants to pass me off as an agent-provocateur of the regime. And this is because at the moment they do not want de Gaulle to be defeated.

*Q: Would you support a Popular Front?*

A: A Popular Front at the moment would be an extremely **positive** step in clarifying the situation: the masses would end up by **under-**standing better the nature of the trade-union bureaucracy **and the** traditional working-class parties and then an alternative on **the left** of the Communist Party could very easily be formed.

*Q: Isn't that a little bit of an over-simplification?*

A: Not at all. Look, there are two extreme possibilities: on the **one** hand the victory of a fascist-type reaction and the relative **defeat of** the proletariat for at least a decade. On the other hand there **might** be the development of a situation like that in Russia at the **beginning** of this century: 1905 or else February 1917. If it turns out to be a February 1917 situation, say we have a so-called Popular Front **with** a Kerensky by the name of Mitterand or Waldeck-Rochet. Certainly there is no shortage of Mensheviks: the difficulty is to find **any** Bolsheviks!

*Q: But is it possible to have a French revolution in a vacuum?*

A: No. The revolution in one country is certainly not feasible. Also from an economic point of view. An economic crisis, caused for example by social conflict, cannot remain isolated in one country. Nor a financial crisis, a dollar crisis, transcends as you know all countries. The system is international. However we have to begin by undermining each particular part of it, and in Paris that's what we have begun. In Paris the situation could truly be described as pre-revolutionary.

*Q: What is the role of the Communist Party in all this?*

A: The Party is one of the two power-structures which at the moment are propping each other up. De Gaulle and his State on the one defensive, and he is defending his position of power in the State. The Party is on the defensive because it is obliged to defend its position of power within the working-class movement. Our action, by contrast, is offensive: that is its advantage. All these intermediate and transitory objectives arising from the present situation, all the strong pressures from below, are pushing away at the old structures of power. You know, in this situation, the Party hasn't very much will to take the reins of the bourgeois state into its hands. Moscow is certainly against it: they have very much more reliance on the General than on the little bureaucrats of the French Communist Party.

*Q: Consequently a Popular Front would detach the masses from the Party?*

A: Yes, that's more or less the idea, but don't forget that in reality the whole thing is very much more complex. The existence of the Party

is an objective reality, one can't decide from one day to another to eliminate it. It is thanks to the Party and the CGT that the concept of the class-struggle has kept its significance in the working-class consciousness. Our accomplishment will be to make conscious the divisions which exist between the declarations of the Party and its actual reformist politics. In the struggles of the last few days we have made enormous strides.

*Q: But the workers haven't let you enter the factories.*

A: It's not true. The functionaries of the Party have only partially succeeded in closing the factory gates on us. They have had to do this so as not to lose their position of power, but this has cost them and is going to cost them a great deal.

*Q: Do you think of the student movement as a new International?*

A: At the moment there are individual contacts and group contacts on an international level, but it is not yet possible to speak of common action. Action is born from below, from the actual situation. It's just the same as in the struggle against capitalism.

*Q: Are you thinking, then, of intensifying contact?*

A: Certainly, but that is not the central problem. Co-ordination would be a positive gain, but a Student International doesn't interest me. It doesn't interest me at all. What we need to form is a new revolutionary left, of which the student movement would be a component. Otherwise the student movement will remain isolated, within the limits of a movement of protest. But we may already be overcoming this. In France, in Italy, and to some extent in Germany, there are already links with the working class, even if they are only at a local level.

*Q: What do you think will be the organisational form of the new revolutionary movement?*

A: It isn't yet possible to say ... We are creating groups at the bottom: workers and students who collaborate for local action. But I don't think it's possible to be more precise than this.

*Q: Perhaps they are already the Bolsheviks of the new revolution, perhaps they have already decided to institute the dictatorship of the proletariat?*

A: No, not the dictatorship of the proletariat. We are against all authority.

### **London, 12th June**

*Q: What exactly do you stand for? Are you a communist?*

A: I am supporting those who form workers' councils, for self-determination for workers and for students. If this is communist you can call me a communist. But I do not agree with Russian politics.

Politics today is not so simple. I am somebody who fights for the self-government of the workers. But when I say that I disagree with the policy of the government in Russia, remember that I disagree also with the policy of the governments in Britain, France, Germany, the USA, etc.

*Q: Danny, you are regarded as the leader of the student movement in France ...*

A: Excuse me, I will never lead anything. I will never tell people what to do. What they want to do they will do, and what they don't want to do they won't.

*Q: It has been reported that you said you want to seek political asylum in this country.*

A: It's true I said this. It is a matter of political finesse. I said before that in France there is a pre-fascist situation. Now there was another man who came to this country and asked for asylum when France had a pre-revolutionary situation. This was in 1940 and his name was de Gaulle. He wanted asylum ...

*Q: De Gaulle was a Frenchman. Now Danny, you are not a Frenchman.*

A: I do not want to compare myself with de Gaulle, you understand. With the young people it does not matter if you are a Frenchman or a German. We don't bother about borders. I was born in France and I lived there, and I consider myself in this sense a Frenchman. This is how young people think. It is important to me that sixty to seventy thousand people all shouted "We are all German Jews".

*Q: But Danny, I may be thick, but I still don't understand what sort of government you want.*

A: We want a workers', peasants', and students' self-government: the people in the factories to control the place where they work and the students to control the place where they work.

*Q: But in the Sorbonne you have got what you were after. Why are the students still demonstrating?*

A: The students are supporting the working-class. One and a half million workers are still on strike, and they are not striking for the money, they want control of what they do.

*Q: What is your reaction to the way you have been received in England?*

A: Well, not astonished. It seems that all the governments want to show that we are right in saying that we live in a repressive society. I arrive in England and they don't want to let me in. Two years ago I came here and nobody said a word. Strange. I don't have to ask Mr Wilson and his Home Office if I want to see some people in England.

*Q: You wouldn't want to give the students here some advice on how to make a revolution?*

A: You don't export revolution. No, you don't export protestation against society. You can explain what has been done in France but it's not advice, you only explain it. You can exchange information about how to play soccer, but you don't export soccer games.

*Q: It was said in the House of Lords that you had the intention of using force to carry out plans in this country.*

A: A lot of people know more than I know. It's very interesting how all sorts of people know what I'm doing and organising. I must really be better than Batman or Superman, just travelling around and organising world revolution. I think it's because people are afraid because of the situation in England. And then they are afraid that a little thing can explode because people are not happy in this country. Perhaps this is the problem.

**(taken from *Anarchy*, July 1968)**



## **Dermot Sreenan**

### **Paris 1968: when France rebelled**

These days you are more likely to hear the word 'revolution' on the soundtrack of a film or on the latest pop release than you are to hear someone talking about bringing one about. It is partly for this reason that people think of revolutions as buried deep in history. Yet, as little as 25 years ago France was on the verge of a total revolt with twelve million workers on strike, 122 factories occupied and students fighting against the old moribund system in which they found themselves.

In the late '60s in France real wages were on the rise, but large sections of the working class were still suffering from low pay. This was despite foreign trade having tripled. 25% of all workers were receiving less than 500 francs (£46) per month. Some unskilled workers were only getting 400 francs per month. Unemployment was at half a million, in a period which was considered a post-war boom. Trade union membership had dropped to around three million, as opposed to seven million in 1945. Not many victories had been won in the preceding years. Michelin boasted that they had only talked to trade unions three times in thirty years. So how did everything change so quickly in the France of 1968?

Nanterre was a university outside Paris. It was new soulless campus built to cater for the increased influx of students. The place was unlike the throbbing cultural live wire of the famous Latin Quarter (Left Bank).

On 22nd March 1968 eight students broke into the dean's office as a way to protest at the recent arrest of six members of the National Vietnam Committee. Among these was a sociology student called Danny Cohn-Bendit. He had been part of a group who organised a strike of 10,000 to 12,000 students in November of 1967 as a protest against overcrowding.

#### ***Student anger***

In the preceding ten years the student population had risen from 170,000 to 514,000. Although the state had provided some funding, this was not equal to the huge influx of students it had asked the universities and colleges to take. The total area covered by university premises had doubled since 1962 but the student numbers had almost tripled. Facilities were desperately inadequate and overcrowding was a serious issue.

Six days after the occupation of the dean's office the police were called in and the campus was surrounded. Five hundred students inside the college divided into discussion groups. Sociology students began to boycott their exams and a pamphlet was produced entitled *Why do we need sociologists?* The students called for a lecture hall to be permanently made available for political discussions.

The lecturers began to split, some in favour of the student demands. The college did provide a room, but by the 2nd April a meeting of 1,200 students was held in one of the main lecture halls.

### ***March 22nd Movement***

After the Easter break agitation was more rampant. On 22nd April (one month after the occupation) a meeting was held in lecture hall B1. It was attended by 1,500 students and the resulting manifesto called for "Outright rejection of the Capitalist Technocratic University" and followed this by a call for solidarity with the working class. It was clear that the March 22nd Movement (which had come together as a semi-formal alliance of anti-authoritarian socialist students) was winning the battle of ideas in the campus amongst their fellow students.

The college decided to discipline eight of the students involved, including Cohn-Bendit. They were called upon to appear before the disciplinary committee of the Sorbonne on 3rd May. Four lecturers volunteered to defend them.

The education strike had not interested the Minister for Education. There were major industrial strikes the preceding year at Rhodiaceta and Saviem. In Rhodiaceta (a synthetic fibres factory in Lyons) a strike took place involving 14,000 workers over 23 days. Management went on to sack 92 militants at the end of the year and had also resorted to lock-outs. In June of 1967 Peugeot called in riot police during a dispute and two workers were killed.

From March to May 1968 there was a total of eighty cases of industrial action at the Renault Billancourt car plant. It was becoming obvious that 'the French did not interest their leaders', as Alain Touraine (a professor at Nanterre who was prepared to defend the student action) said. These leaders were soon about to be awoken from their oblivious slumber.

### ***Red and black flags drape the Arc de Triomphe***

On Friday 3rd May a few students gathered in the front square of the Sorbonne. The students were from Nanterre and they were joined by activists from the Sorbonne college itself. The 'Nanterre

Eight' were about to face charges on the following Monday. The eight and some colleagues from Nanterre were meeting student activists from the Sorbonne to discuss the impending Monday.

The crowd began to swell and the college authorities panicked. By 4pm the Sorbonne was surrounded by police and the Campagnes Republicanes de Securite (CRS riot police). Students were being arrested by the CRS, on the basis that they were spotted wearing motorcycle helmets. News spread rapidly and students came from all over the city. Fighting began to free those who had already been arrested. Such was this battle between students and police that the college closed.

This was only the second time in seven hundred years that the Sorbonne was forced to close, the other time being in 1940 when the Nazis took Paris.

The National Union of Students (UNEF) and the Lecturers' Union (SNESup) immediately called a strike and issued the following demands

1. Re-open the Sorbonne.
2. Withdraw the Police.
3. Release those arrested.

These unions were joined by the March 22nd Movement. The original discontent had arisen from overcrowding but it now began to take on a larger perspective.

### ***Police riot***

On Monday 6th May the 'Nanterre Eight' passed through a police cordon singing the 'Internationale'. They were on their way to appear before the University Discipline Committee. The students decided to march through Paris. On their return to the Latin Quarter they were savagely attacked by the police on the Rue Saint Jacques.

The students tore up paving stones and overturned cars to form barricades. Police pumped tear-gas into the air and called for reinforcements. The Boulevard St Germain became a bloody battleground with the official figures at the end of the day reading: 422 arrests and 345 policemen injured. This day was to go into the annals of '68 as 'Bloody Monday'.

A long march followed on the Tuesday and, by outmanoeuvring the police, red and black flags were draped from the Arc de Triomphe and the 'Internationale' echoed around the streets. The week continued on in a similar fashion and the streets were alive with crowds and talk of politics. By Wednesday public opinion was shifting.

### ***Stomach for a fight***

The middle classes were appaled by the brutality dished out to the students by the police and large sections of the working class were inspired by the students' stomach for a fight against the state. On Friday 10th May 30,000 students, including high school students, had gathered around the Place Denfert-Rochereau. They marched towards the Sorbonne along the Boulevard St Germain. All roads leading off the boulevard were blocked by police armed for conflict.

Fifty barricades were erected by the demonstrators in preparation for an attack by the police. Jean Jacques Lebel, a reporter, wrote that by 1.00am "Literally thousands help build barricades ... women, workers, bystanders, people in pyjamas, human chains to carry rocks, wood, iron".

"Our barricade is double: one three-foot high row of cobble stones, an empty space of twenty yards, then a nine foot high pile of wood, cars, metal posts, dustbins. Our weapons are stones, metal, etc., found in the street" reported one eye-witness.

Radio reporters said that as many as sixty barricades were erected in different streets. France stayed up to listen to reports on Europe One and Radio Luxembourg. The government had yielded on two of the three demands but would not release those arrested. There was to be no 'Liberez nos comrades!'.

### ***The beat goes on***

The barricades were attacked by the police. They used tear-gas and CS grenades. Students and demonstrators used handkerchiefs soaked in baking soda to protect themselves from the nauseous gases. Fighting continued throughout the night. Houses were stormed by the police and people were dragged and clubbed as they were thrown into vans. The police, and in particular the CRS, were most brutal in their treatment of the demonstrators.

There were reports of pregnant women being beaten. Young men were stripped and some had their sexual organs beaten until the flesh was in ribbons. At the end of this battle of the streets there were 367 people injured, and 460 arrested. On Saturday morning troop carriers were brought in to clear the barricades and they were booed and hissed as they drove down the Boulevard St Germain.

On Monday 13th May the students were released but the spark had already started the forest fire. The trade unions called a one-day strike and a march was organised in Paris for the same day. Over 200,000 people (a conservative figure) turned up for the march shouting 'De Gaulle Assassin'. The leader of the government was

now singled out as an enemy by the people. After the **march** there was a call for the crowd to disperse and many did but a **large group** of students decided that they would occupy the Sorbonne.

### ***Communists up to their old tricks***

The PCF (French Communist Party) had condemned the **Nanterre** rebels from the start. Their future General Secretary, **Georges Marchais**, published an article entitled 'False revolutionaries to be unmasked'. In this article he claimed the March 22nd **Movement** were "mostly sons of the grand bourgeois, contemptuous towards the students of working class origin" and predicted that they would "quickly snuff out their revolutionary flames to become directors in Papa's business".

But by 8th May when the party leadership saw the size of the movement they changed their tune and attempted to take control of the uprising. They saw that the example of the students was now being followed in the workplaces. They thought it better to be seen encouraging action than letting the situation escape their control.

Once again the Communists had misjudged the situation. The CGT (the Communist dominated trade union) leadership also started to support workplace action, though only after workers had already taken the lead. Louis Aragon (France's most famous Communist writer) was sent to address a meeting at the Odéon. Those of the March 22nd Movement who were present jeered and heckled him throughout with satirical cries of "Long live Stalin, father of all people".

One member of the political bureau, Roger Garudy, embraced the students' doctrine of economic self-management, autonomous councils and decentralisation. Along with extending solidarity with the aims of the students he also applauded the events of the 'Prague Spring'. He was soon expelled from the PCF.

### ***Truth is whatever serves the party***

Mostly, the PCF persisted in classifying the student movement as "an entire ultra-left, petty-bourgeois cocktail of Bakunin, Trotskyism and plain adventurism". Around this time an anonymous article was published in the party paper *L'Humanité*. Its author claimed that the Minister for Youth had 'contacts' with Cohn-Bendit and that money was granted to the March 22nd Movement. This accusation was a complete fabrication and the height of some very strange imagination. This, of course, was neither the first nor last time the Communists resorted to this type of tactic.

The Sorbonne became transformed overnight as posters of Marx, Lenin and Mao decorated the old pillars surrounding the front square. Red and black flags hung alongside the Vietcong flag. Trotsky, Castro and Che Guevara pictures were plastered on walls alongside slogans such as 'Everything is Possible' and 'It is Forbidden to Forbid'. This picture of the Sorbonne gives a good indication of the confusion of ideologies encompassed within the student movement.

A fifteen person occupation committee was elected on the 14th May and its mandate was limited to 24 hours. The central amphitheatre was pulsating day and night with political debate. The examination system was condemned as "being the rite of initiation into the capitalist society". The March 22nd Movement wanted to "eradicate the distinction between workers and managers rather than turn more workers' sons into managers".

### ***Revolutionary collectables***

The Ecole de Beaux Arts (School of Fine Arts) was occupied on 14th May. There were meetings every morning at which themes were chosen. Then posters would be produced via a silk screen production basis. It was most ironic that these posters became almost immediately collectors' items and were soon to be found in the homes of the rich.

The posters were covered with such slogans as 'Mankind will not live free until the last capitalist has been hanged with the entrails of the last bureaucrat'. 'The general will against the will of the general'. 'Commodities are the opium of the people'. Paris was plastered with such posters.

The political atmosphere of the time led to occupations by radical doctors, architects, and writers. Even the Cannes film festival was disrupted in 1968 when "Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut seized the festival hall in support of the national strike movement".

### ***Strikes***

On 14th May the workers of Sud Aviation near Nantes occupied their factory. Then Renault plants at Cleon, Flins, Le Mans and Boulogne Billancourt all went on strike. Young workers at Cleon refused to leave the factory at the end of their shift and locked the manager into his office. The union leadership were stumbling behind the mood of the workers. At places like Sud-Aviation the decision to go on indefinite strike was taken by the workers without consulting the union officials.

The CGT leaders had been taken totally by surprise and now were desperately trying not to lose all influence. The workers were leading, in their demands and actions. The union leadership – for a short time – followed like a dog keeping up with its master, as it saw this as the only method to maintaining some influence over the workers.

On 16th May a few thousand students marched to Boulogne Billancourt where 35,000 workers were on strike. The CGT officials locked the factory gates to discourage communication. But workers got up on the roof of the factory and shouted greetings and discussions took place though the iron railings. Solidarity was there and it could not be suppressed by a few chains and locked gates.

Industrial Normandy, Paris and Lyons closed down virtually *en masse*. On 18th May coal production stopped and public transport in Paris halted. The National Railways were next to go out on strike. Gas and electricity workers took over control of their workplaces but continued domestic supplies. Red flags hung from shipyards at St Nazaire which employed 10,000 workers. The weekend of the 19th May saw two million people on strike and 122 factories were reported to be occupied.

### ***Strike wave sweeps France***

Money withdrawals from banks were limited to 500 francs as the possibility of a Bank Of France strike panicked people. Petrol supplies soon dried up as drivers stocked up. By Monday 20th May no cross-channel ferries were in operation and tourists queued for buses or evacuation coaches to Brussels, Geneva, and Barcelona.

The Citroen factory which employed a lot of immigrant labour from Portugal, North Africa and Yugoslavia was still in operation. On 20th May, as the morning shift headed into work at 6.00am they were greeted with the sight of a student picket. As the young foreign workers were puzzling over the students' leaflets and whether or not to go into work, along came a march of colleagues from a nearby factory. Citroen was on strike.

The textile industry and big department stores of Paris joined the snowballing general strike on Tuesday 21st. The air traffic controllers in Orly and French television (ORTE) had already voted to come out the previous Friday.

On the 20th May ORTE staff issued the following demands:

1. Forty Hour Week.
2. Lower Retirement Age.
3. Abrogation of the anti-strike laws of 1963.

4. Minimum wage of 1000 francs a week.
5. Repeal of the government's involvement in the television station. Teachers were on strike as of the 22nd, although many attended school in order to keep in contact with school students as the unions had requested.

### ***Now is not a good time to die***

Within a fortnight of the general strike being called, more than nine million workers were out on strike. As one person put it: "On Wednesday the undertakers went on strike. Now is not a good time to die."

Workers displayed a great ability to lead by example. The gas and electricity workers joined the strike but maintained supplies apart from a few brief power cuts. Food supplies reached Paris as normal after initial disruptions. The postal workers agreed to deliver urgent telegrams.

Print workers said they did not wish to leave a monopoly of media coverage to television and radio and agreed to print newspapers as long as the press "carries out with objectivity the role of providing information which is its duty". In some cases print-workers insisted on changes in headlines or articles before they would print the paper. This happened mostly with the right wing papers such as *Le Figaro* or *La Nation*.

In some factories workers continued or altered production to suit their needs. In the CSE factory in Brest the workers produced walkie-talkies which they considered important to both strikers and demonstrators alike. At the Wonder Batteries factory in Saint-Ouen the strike committee disapproved of the reformist line of the CGT and decided to barricade themselves in rather than talk to the union officials.

### ***A workers' city***

In Nantes, the whole movement and events of 1968 were to reach a pinnacle. For a week in May the city and its surrounding area was controlled by the workers, themselves. The old guardians of power and authority looked on helplessly as workers took control of their own lives and city. On 24th May road blocks were set up around the city as farmers made a protest of solidarity with the workers and students.

The transport workers took over the road blocks and they controlled all incoming traffic. Petrol supplies were controlled, with no petrol tankers being allowed into the city without the workers'



permission. The only functioning petrol pump was reserved for use by doctors. By circumventing the middle man, the workers and farmers made it possible to reduce the cost of food. Milk was now 50 centimes, as opposed to 80 previously. Potatoes dropped 48 centimes per kilo in price.

To make sure these price cuts were passed on, shops had to display stickers provided by the strike committee saying "This shop is authorised to open. Its prices are under permanent supervision by the unions". Teachers and students organised nurseries so that strikers' children were cared for while the schools were closed. Women played a very active role in Nantes organising, not only as strikers but also playing a vital role in committees dealing with food supplies.

This all too brief week in Nantes is a prime example of the working class seizing control of an area and running it in a socialist manner, even in such difficult circumstances. We can see that the society created in many ways was an improvement on the one Nantes unfortunately changed back into after the events of 1968.

### *Pacify and dissipate*

De Gaulle, now fearing for the survival of his government and slowly looking at his power disappear, addressed the country on television on 24th May. He spoke of "a more extensive participation of everyone in the conduct and the result of the activities which directly concern them." De Gaulle asked the people through a referendum as a "mandate for renewal and adaption".

On the same day the March 22nd Movement organised a demonstration. 30,000 marched towards the Palace de la Bastille. The police had the Ministries protected, using the usual devices of tear-gas and batons, but the Bourse (Stock Exchange) was left unprotected. This was the time to act and a number of demonstrators armed with axe handles, wooden clubs and iron bars went and set fire to it.

It was at this stage that some left wing groups lost their nerve. The Trotskyist JCR turned people back into the Latin Quarter. Other groups such as UNEF and Parti Socialiste Unifié (United Socialist Party) blocked the taking of the Ministries of Finance and Justice. Cohn-Bendit said of this incident "As for us, [March 22nd Movement] we failed to realise how easy it would have been to sweep all these nobodies away ... It is now clear that if, on 25th May, Paris had woken to find the most important Ministries occupied, Gaullism would have caved in at once". Cohn-Bendit was forced

into exile later that very night.

The students of the March 22nd Movement would not have caused the collapse of Gaullism with this occupation, but it would have raised the consciousness of many of the young militant workers who were inspired by the fighting spirit shown by the students. The students' struggle, although confused, and encompassing many varying ideologies, had been an inspiration. The dynamite was there and the student uprising was the fuse paper.

### *To the Ministries*

The occupation of the Ministries would have been one step further along the line towards a social revolution. Of the twelve million workers now on strike only three million were previously involved in trade unions. The general strike which had paralysed the country saw workers' demands far surpass those issued by the union leaders. Expectations had been raised by the wave of agitation that was sweeping across the land.

The occupations of the Ministries could have brought an awareness to people that what could be won here was more than economic agreements with the bosses. The move would have brought the workers closer to the realisation that what was at stake here was how the system was run and not just how to tinker with its engine. In every uprising of the sort we witnessed in 1968 there is a need for organised groups to win the battle of ideas and to fuse those ideas into action so that people are aware of what can be gained, what victories are possible.

The student movement, if it had occupied the government buildings, would have taken a step in this direction. The workers were inspired by the fight of the students on the streets of Paris, militant workers could have been inspired by the occupations of the Ministries, and a realisation could have swept through France that there was more to be won than pay rises from the bosses.

### *Fin*

By Monday May 27th the Government had guaranteed an increase of 35% in the industrial minimum wage and an all round wage increase of 10%. The leaders of the CGT organised a march of 500,000 workers through the streets of Paris two days later. Paris was covered in posters calling for a 'Government of the People'. Unfortunately the majority still thought in terms of changing their rulers rather than taking control for themselves.

De Gaulle and his puppets had been so scared by the possibility of

revolution that he flew to military airfield at Saint-Dizier and talked with his top generals, making sure that he could rely on them if he needed the army's help to maintain his grip on power. On 30th May he once again appeared on French television, abandoning his plans for the referendum and promising elections within forty days.

De Gaulle in typical fashion promised tougher measures if, as he put it, "the whole French people were gagged or prevented from leading a normal existence, by those elements (reds and anarchists) that are being used to prevent students from studying, the workers from working". Following de Gaulle's address the CRS were sent to disperse the remaining pickets from workplaces.

By June 5th most of the strikes were over and an air of what passes for normality within capitalism had swept back over France. Any strikes which continued after this date were crushed in a military style operation using armoured vehicles and guns. In isolation those pockets of militancy stood no chance.

### *Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory*

All street demonstrations were banned and once again the PCF sought respectability by using its influence to destroy what was left of the action committees. By the end of June the colleges were regained and the red and black flags were torn down from the front of the Sorbonne.

In this climate of defeat and demoralisation people turned back to the certainties of conservatism. In the elections the Gaullists captured 60% of the vote. Their grip on the reins of power was reinforced.

In 1968 you had a system which is replicated in most countries in western Europe today. Yet, during the events of May that system was in total turmoil and de Gaulle had foreseen that he might have had to use the army to crush the movement of people. The streets of France could have flowed with blood like they most certainly did in Chile five years later.

Cohn-Bendit and the March 22nd Movement aspired to a classless society based on workers' councils where the division of labour between order-givers and order-takers disappeared. But obviously this vision of a future society was not shared by others on the left and the part they played was to place more obstacles in the way rather than to overcome the ones that already existed.

Where the power of the state has been broken down, the working class led by example, as in Nantes where they showed themselves capable of controlling and managing their city. The most active

strikers were more progressive and far sighted than their union leaders. Workers showed that there was more to be attained than simple demands and inspiring took that fight to the bosses.

### ***Stalinists wanted total control***

Why did France '68 ultimately fail? There was no co-ordination of ideas or tactics when events reached a crucial stage. The influential PCF believed that their power would increase in the elections and so were hostile to all movements which were outside of their control. The trade union leadership helped pacify the workers by restricting the focus of workers to 'bread and butter' demands and away from the wider political issues.

Many people had fine aspirations but not much idea of how to achieve those aims. Too many things were left to chance and the whole movement seemed to stumble on from day to day like a blind man desperately trying to find the light of freedom that must exist at the end of the tunnel. What lessons can we learn from the events of '68? We saw a developed capitalist society being brought to the edge of revolt, people questioning the entire system.

The events took place very rapidly as the working class, fused by the energy and bravado of the students, raised demands that could not be catered for within the confines of the existing system. The general strike displays with beautiful clarity the potential power that lies in the hands of the working class. However, the situation needed more co-ordination and organisation. The workers needed to organise inter-workplace committees, and create a mechanism whereby delegates began to deal with the real problems.

### ***From negotiations to revolt***

The anti-authoritarian left, though very active, were too weak among striking workers. The various workers on strike could have co-ordinated their action in order to push the state backwards. France was already in turmoil industrially and the government was weakening. Workers' councils and real democracy throughout the workplaces could have led to stronger negotiations and, eventually, outright revolt.

Once the factories went into a position of self-management the state would be losing the battle. Self-management never got onto the agenda, for reasons explained above. Shopfloor workers needed a mechanism to represent their views and have an effective democratic decision making process. The union leadership feared and circumvented this. But through democratically elected delegates, factory

committees could have raised demands which would be impossible for the state to satisfy. It could have posed the question, who should run France?

We, the working class, must prepare ourselves for the rapid explosion of revolt, so that we do not settle for pay rises when more is to be won. We win pay rises when we can but in France in 1968 the state was more vulnerable and the possibility for a radical change in society was there. We must have the ideas and a system prepared to replace the one we live under at present. When our chance comes to knock the bosses from their pedestal we must grab it with both hands. We must destroy and replace the system when it falls into a position of weakness, not just for our own sakes but for the future of humanity.

**(originally published in 1993 in *Workers Solidarity*)**

## *John Rety*

### **A week in the life of 'Freedom' in 1968**

I was one of the editors of *Freedom* in 1968, having been asked to become one after a long piece of mine – which was sub-edited by Albert Meltzer – was used for the front page lead. The person who asked me to attend my inaugural editorial meeting in Gilbert Place was Philip Sansom, who was both writer and cartoonist and probably the best anarchist speaker both indoor and outdoor. I am mentioning these two names to show the polarities and the fact that they, at that time in the '60s, were to my mind the best of comrades. Other editors of *Freedom* who were present included Peter Turner, Jack Robinson, Jack Stevenson and Philip Holgate – the last named being the best theoretician who always had at his fingertips the thin line of anarchist dialectic at which Vernon Richards, and later Nicolas Walter, also excelled.

*Freedom* was then a weekly paper when I joined the editorial team. Its job became more and more difficult as the paper gained in circulation under our editorship. It became really two papers, if not three, put out together. Nobody was paid even for expenses and we could not have survived the great increase in circulation (failure is easy, success is hard) from the low hundreds, when I joined, to the high thousands by 1968.

The back page had its autonomous editors, Peter Turner and Bill Christopher, and their enclave was clearly marked '*Freedom* – for Workers' Control'.

Articles were commissioned not so much on topics, but people were encouraged to write for the paper. Any two editors having given approval constituted acceptance. Each article or news item was passed round the table and, once read, somebody would say 'this is just what we need for page two don't you think' or sometimes 'not such tosh' or 'not him again?' or 'would somebody read through this and see if any of it can be used?' The two signatures having been obtained, the copy would be marked up for the typesetter (hot metal) and the lead story was chosen. Considering that every one of us worked and the paper had to be put together at one sitting, it is remarkable how good humoured and pleasant the editorial meeting was.

There were basically three strands which held us together: there was the utopian ideal, there was the bread-and-butter workers' control and there was the tremendous growth in the movement.

*Freedom*, it must be admitted, could not cope with the upsurge of interest. All right, our circulation reached an unprecedented six thousand copies and the volume of correspondence became so great that the pages had to be increased, not to mention the monthly supplements and the regional Scottish edition. The meetings at the Lamb & Flag became so packed that a Trotskyist remarked "The ball is in your court, kick it".

There was no way, having produced the whirlwind, we could control it. Anarchism we knew could not be forced down people's throats, enlarging goose livers was not our speciality.

'Near beer' groups, however, took bits and pieces from the anarchist idea and succeeded tremendously with them. Partial successes were of no use. Occupation of factories without workers' control had to end in failure. Occupation of schools without education on demand had to end in failure. Massive movements against war, but leaving state power untouched, had to end in failure. The 'educated' leaders of labour movements knew all about anarchism and used its liberating ideas *only* to abandon such ideas at the right tactical moment.

Whether it was the organised squatters movement which left home ownership where it was and negotiated with councils, or a theoretical off-shoot (the greens were born about then), or the 'situationists' (authoritarian operators of great skill and no shame), to all these the anarchist movement was like an ample-bosomed wet nurse which fed, and still feeds, every child needing to suck.

The anarchist revolution should have happened in this country probably by the mid '70s had the pace of events not knocked us out. Instead of the revolution, the balloon burst. By the mid '70s *Freedom* became a fortnightly, with a circulation back into the hundreds. One by one, the anarchist groups have folded up. There has been a recent revival, but an anarchist movement that nobody in the '60s would recognise. There are many reasons for this. As far as *Freedom* was concerned, the technology of printing has also changed and as such now controls the production instead of the other way around.

In the '60s we owned a beautiful Gutenberg press and the machine was operated by Dick Pugh with one assistant. Dick was a master printer and he made the production of *Freedom* a real delight.

The schedule was this: the sub-edited pages were typeset in Linotype and Dick would spend a whole morning putting the pages into chases, having set the headlines individually and put the leading in to make the spaces. Then each page would be proofed on a proofing press, and it was usually my job to read through to spot the

odd mistake or upside down letter. The beauty of the whole operation was that it was immediate and if an important news item came in we could literally stop the press and insert just that bit of information, which was our blood-line to comrades who wanted help as quickly as possible. It is remarkable how much news we could print which was ahead of everybody else, even though Fleet Street had all the money, all the reporters and all the resources. But then we had *no* censorship and we were outside the 'D Notice' ('don't print') network.

The paper was produced in one day's operation, which is still quicker than any other newspaper produced today, for many so-called newspapers, the so-called dailies are usually five days behind the news except for the weather report of the previous day. This is contentious stuff but even the most mundane local paper takes a week to produce before you cut it up for compost.

This very article is written on 10th May 1998 and with the best will in the world (we no longer have our own printing press or the services of Dick Pugh the master printer, whose typographical skill was admired all over the world) my guess is that it will be printed by some nine-to-five machine minder without the least concern as to the subject matter, a job like any other, and perhaps in a couple of months from now it will be inked up and I would not be very popular with the comrade printer if I would ask to stop the press and insert a vital appeal from, say, Portsmouth where a comrade may need information on how to tie two sticks together.

Then, as now, *Freedom* would have had a lot of correspondence and in my time it would have been dealt with by Lilian Wolfe, well into her 80s by then, who silently worked through the week's mail and divided it for either editorial or bookshop attention. She was marvellous to have around, her very presence commanded silence. Most editorial offices are neurotic madhouses, here was quiet dignity. She had brought a flask of tea and cucumber sandwiches and she answered in one sitting several hundred communications in her careful legible script. Such people are a treasure and without Lilian Wolfe and Dick Pugh *Freedom* would have been a different paper altogether.

There were others, of course. Vernon Richards was in those days more involved in the writing, editing and publishing of books, and only occasionally wrote for *Freedom*. In a way it was he who rescued *Freedom* after its virtual collapse in the '70s. But the two people to whom most is due are Mary Canipa and her companion Jack Robinson. Without them there would have been no publishing of



books (Mary typed the books, deciphering without an error many a wine-stained manuscript, and Jack sold the books and delivered them to all the bookshops in his rucksack and found books for each and every one of us to read). He once gave me a Kropotkin first edition in green buckram, alas in a language I cannot read with pleasure. There was always a gathering at *Freedom* for the folding and dispatch of the paper, hot off the press, with sandwiches like doorsteps provided by Mary, and tea and aphorisms from Jack Robinson. His name was his own, although when Freedom Press was once raided the policeman, having asked him his name and he replied in all honesty, the constable went all red in the face and said "That's enough of your cheek".

Jack Robinson was also an editor and compiled an 'Out of This World' column with a particular blend of sarcasm and off-beat journalism. He wrote all his articles in long-hand and had the ability to annoy the mildest contributors. He and Mary were pacifists and when Jack went to jail for refusing to fill in his census form, he spent his six months in custody reciting mentally the entire works of Shakespeare which he had carefully committed to memory prior to going to jail, thus sparing himself the bother of noticing his immediate surroundings.

The technological changes which have occurred since (had they been in the '60s I would still have preferred to go it side by side with the letter-press for the end product would have been worth saving) is of course in favour of dissemination of anarchist ideas, but to give a concrete example, as an editor I was privileged to have the job of occasionally shortening articles by such prolific writers as Laurens Otter (once referred to as anarchism's encyclopedic philosopher) and Arthur Moyse, the best art critic among other things. These two have unerringly supplied us with important articles written in a style rich in anecdote but not necessarily transparent at first reading. All that was needed with Arthur's pieces was to disentangle what was meant for readers of *Freedom* and what was his laundry list, whereas with Laurens Otter his footnotes were of such great interest that each item could have been the basis for an entire book. But the point about Laurens Otter, Arthur Moyse, or Arthur W. Uloth and a host of other contributors such as Wynford Hicks and Roger Sandell, was that, in cricketering terms, they were all fast bowlers *and* brilliant batsmen for anarchism. The main thing was not to get them entangled in a letters page dispute or correspondence. This was easy to achieve by reducing the letters to short paragraphs which did not suit their style.

For me the electronic advances do not compensate for what we have lost. Were I still an editor I would certainly throw open the pages to open discussion before the paper was actually printed. This is the main difference, as far as I can see, in printing in contrast to electronic publishing. There does not seem to be a deadline in electronics. In other words, there is no new issue and there is no discussion following publication. What you read now may well have been written in past ages or not even written at all by a single individual. There is no Dick Pugh tying up the frame and there is no Lilian Wolfe sending you a cogent note in her patient handwriting. But then how did it happen? As the Trotskyist said to the anarchists, "the ball needs to be kicked". How did it get out of our court?

The glorious May Days came too early for the small anarchist movement, however influential we may have been in planting the seeds of self-management, workers' control, occupations of schools and universities, not to mention the rights of the individual in every respect.

It spread like wildfire. At times the black flags were flying everywhere from Berkeley to Strasbourg and in the Sorbonne. There was a short-lived dialogue between the workers and the students. As in 1926 when the General Strike succeeded and the government was ready to resign, confronted with the enormity of power and decision-making the strike collapsed. The famous attempt of de Gaulle to surrender French national independence to NATO rather than to succumb to anarchism brought the statist back into control.

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the man, the student, who did most of the talking at the time, came to London after the defeat and I met him at a party given to him in his honour. I found him to be arrogant and unable to understand the consequences of the defeat of the movement. He was contemptuous of the British anarchist movement and especially of *Freedom*, and he denied that he was ever an anarchist and implied that 'situationism' was a Marxist ideology and anarchism belonged to the era of the cart-horse.

The leaders of the French May Days were as horrified by the upsurge of anarchism as were those, like de Gaulle, in power. It has taken us thirty years to regain a little ground. But anarchism cannot speak through the current mode of single issue or the sophistication of non-governmental organisations. The movement is now tremendously large. Perhaps it is a good thing that, given the nature of our new communication systems, there is less likelihood of acting before the time is ripe. It is not a question of being utopian. It is an old anarchist saying that is worth repeating: 'Before we have the anarchist society there has to be a society of anarchists'.

**P.B.****Whitsun in the streets**

The most revolutionary impression of Paris over the Whitsun weekend was that of the simple freedom of movement and human contact in and around the Sorbonne; a simplicity which ought to be a natural way of behaviour, but which now comes as a surprise in a modern city.

In the Sorbonne itself there is a total lack of suspicion and interference, in spite of fears of attacks by 'Occident' (a tough right-wing counter-revolutionary group). The whole world is there – students, workers, foreigners of all descriptions; activists (both serious and controlled, and the wild), liberal intellectuals, tourists. Hundreds of people sleep on floors and benches; there are rooms full of food supplies for the occupying students; and armies of students sweeping up. It seemed the natural thing for us to set up a stove and cook our meal in the Sorbonne courtyard, and other days we cooked and slept in parks and streets all over Paris; nobody objected and it provided a good way of meeting people. There was not a cop to be seen on the Left Bank (except those rushing through in armoured buses).

But there is a seriousness which makes the frivolity important, so that eating and loving and merry-making in the parks becomes both an object and a symbol of the revolution. The Sorbonne scene is run by a series of Action Committees, dealing with relations with the strikers, art and theatre, education, printing of tracts, organising of food, cleaning, etc. Meetings are continually being held to discuss both action and the philosophy of the revolution – live, exciting meetings where political speeches become poetry. both individually and *en masse*. Things happen quickly: some English students arrived on Saturday, got together a large heterogeneous group on the Monday to form an 'English Speaking Peoples Action Committee', discussed a proposal to liberate the British Institute in Paris, and at 4pm the next day, with the co-operation of some students from the Institute and from the Sorbonne, occupied the building. (Many of the teachers seemed quite pleased, and appeared to welcome the opportunity of teaching the less bourgeois-orientated versions of British culture which are to replace the Cambridge proficiency courses.)

In contrast to the freedom of the Sorbonne, there is the Ecole Des Beaux Arts, which is being run like a paramilitary poster factory, hard men with helmets and sticks at the gate, questioning every would-be entrant in great detail. The restrictive atmosphere is not reduced

by the Stalinesque architecture nor by the shining of torches into eyes in the *dortoir* (where rows of camp beds provide an ordered luxury absent at the Sorbonne). Two friends of mine found that to obtain three posters required the sort of feats of conmanship needed to steal files on draft-dodgers from the Pentagon. But on the other side of the coin, they are serious. They want only people ready to work, for whom there are beds and food. They recently threw out a load of 'malingerers'. Conscious of the dangers of having 'foreign agitators' caught, they would not allow my two friends to go around Paris poster-sticking.

It is presumably the sheer number of people in the Sorbonne which allows it to remain open to all, yet relatively secure (as well as the group of 'Katangese' toughs who lived there until ejected by the students on 13th-14th June). It would require so many attackers to take the building that they would be dispersed before they had time to group themselves in large enough numbers to be effective. (*A propos* the attacks, a large number of books in the Sorbonne archives were burned on 31st May a senseless act blamed by the students upon 'Occident', but no one was able to verify this. This has been the only sign of vandalism since the revolution began, however.)

Posters, slogans, pamphlets, newspapers, proclaim every left-wing philosophy known (with the possible exception of the CP: I only saw one sign, which announced "The French CP does not want to change society, only the Government", but this may have been a Trotskyist joke). A good news-sheet, *Le Pave* (The Paving Stone), prints a day-by-day account of the barricades and a letter on Black Power by Rap Brown, and also a letter from the Soldiers Committee of Vincennes warning soldiers of the dangers of being used by the Government to break strikes: "You are the sons of the people ... to isolate you from the people it [the Government] orders you to the barracks ... demand your passes". The *Voix Ouvriere*, a Trotskyist paper run mainly by workers, preaches full co-operation between workers and students, denounces the CP and the elections. Several strikers we talked to who were on guard duty at the Renault factory at Billancourt did want complete revolution of the political system, did not support the CGT, but otherwise seemed fairly orthodox Communists, supported the Russian system and believed that elections would achieve revolution. According to one striker the average wage for operatives is about £18 a week, including bonuses, and it is perhaps an example of the French approach to life that it is the better-off workers and those working in one of the most alienating work situations of all, who are the first to demand changes in the power structure.

However, they had no clear idea as to who they wanted to form a Government (certainly neither de Gaulle, Mitterand nor Mendes-France).

Despite the proliferation of revolutionary ideas at the Sorbonne, as Cohn-Bendit pointed out at the LSE teach-in on 13th June, the intellectuals were caught unawares by the sudden eruptions, without having formed a coherent and cohesive philosophy on which to base action after the crisis had occurred. This task has yet to be done, and the lack of such a philosophy may be one of the main reasons why the strikers did not take over the running of their factories, nor take control of the distribution services. (There is also the reluctance of the CGT to commit any 'illegal act'.) The ensuing paralysis was an important factor in generating the return to work.

I have an impression that the press is trying to exaggerate the split between the CP and the more militant left, with the object of both discrediting the CP morally, and demonstrating the ineffectiveness of the remainder: a *France-Soir* journalist we talked to thought that the CGT were philosophically behind the Renault workers, but that they did not want to commit themselves publicly to what they thought would be a failed revolution: so they simply arranged that the terms they negotiated with the government would be bound to be thrown out by the workers.

One of the most hopeful signs during the revolution has been the involvement of professional groups. *Le Monde* ran an account of a meeting on 23rd May of seven hundred architects in the Institut d'Urbanisme which gave full support to the students and decided to participate through their profession in the movement towards changing the structure of society and of the professions. They have also occupied their regional council office, and intend to hold all future meetings at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. (*L'Express* reports that the occupation of the architects' regional council offices was undertaken by a group of which 90% were architects and only 10% students.)

A 'Commission of Inter-Professional Relations' (Ex-ENSBA) consisting of groups of architects, city-planners, highway engineers builders, masons, social psychologists, etc., voted unanimously at a meeting on 1st June to set up an organisation to fight against the capitalist structure of the professions.

Practically every educational institution in Paris has been taken over: a friend of mine at a school for interpreters, for example, has spent the past two weeks working extremely hard on the details of a new 'constitution' for his college.

The main work of the students over the Whit weekend appeared to

be the organising of groups to go to the factories to help persuade the strikers to continue. The seriousness had not evaporated over the hot sunny weekend. The Odéon on Tuesday was still packed with ardent debaters, speaking in rapid but ordered succession. The atmosphere was holiday, but a heady holiday which was no escape from life, like our standard fortnights in Blackpool or Torremolinos but a confirmation of life. A holiday in which everyone participated a holiday which everyone had themselves created (in this sense it was more than the joyful feeling of disruption produced by heavy snowfalls or power failures). The crowds in the Sorbonne did perhaps appear to be milling about aimlessly, but it was the open aimlessness of people searching, questioning, come to discover the situation and their part in it, and by their very being there they made the situation.

The Sorbonne so clearly stands for something, indefinable, but definitely something much more than the system of human relationships we survive on at the moment. Even when the present excitement and openness has died down, as Cohn-Bendit says, the people now know their power, and even if there is no immediate change in work conditions and relationships, people who feel that the mechanised role-playing life is again overpowering them, can continue to provoke crisis after crisis until the changes do occur. The renewed attacks upon the police of 11th June showed that the students have by no means lost hope in the revolution: and whether or not revolution is achieved, the affluence of Western society in general and the committed position taken by so many French professionals, intellectuals and students, are bound to ensure that substantial changes do occur within the educational and professional systems.

It is more difficult to predict what will happen in the factories. But perhaps the whole feeling of the revolution was crystallised in the meeting we had with a group of anarchist workers when we were cooking our supper in the street in Les Halles, during the monster traffic jam on the Tuesday evening. They leapt out of a cafe on top of us, asked us what we thought of the revolution, declared the strike was continuing 100%, clenched fists, proclaimed; "C'est une revolution de vivre, les patrons, les ouvriers, tous les deux", and "Les syndicats vent depasses, Repasses", leapt into a big Citroen van shouting they were off to the provinces to spread the word, and just disappeared down the street where traffic had been moving at the rate of two car-lengths every minute. A minute later they were gone, but leaving a stronger impression on us than any other people in Paris.

(taken from *Anarchy*, July 1968)

## ***Fredy Perlman***

### **Occupation of the Citroen Works**

The action committees born throughout France at the end of May transcend half a century of left-wing political activity. Drawing their militants from every left-wing sect and party, from social democrats to anarchists, the Action Committees give new life to goals long forgotten by the socialist movement; they give new content to forms of action which existed in Europe during the French Revolution – they introduce into the socialist movement altogether new forms of local participial and creative social activity.

This article will trace the development, during the last ten days of May of a committee (the 'Workers-Students Action Committee-Citroen') whose primary task was to connect the 'student movement' with the workers of the Citroen automobile plants in and around Paris.

On Tuesday, 21st May, a strike committee representing the workers of the Citroen plants called for a strike of unlimited duration. The factory owners immediately called for 'state powers to take the measures which are indispensable for the assurance of the freedom of labour and free access to the factories for those who want to work.' (*Le Monde*, 23rd May)

The same day that the owners called for police intervention, students, young workers and teachers who, on previous days had fought the police on the streets of Paris, formed the 'Citroen Action Committee' at the Censier centre of the University of Paris. The first aim of the Action Committee was to co-operate with the factory's strike committee in bringing about an occupation of the factory. The Action Committee's long-term goal was to help bring about a revolutionary situation which would lead to the destruction of capitalist society and the creation of new social relations.

Action Committee Citroen is composed of young French and foreign workers and intellectuals who, from the committee's inception, had equal power and equal voice in the formulation of the committee's projects and methods. The committee did not begin with, and has not acquired, either a fixed programme or fixed organisational structure. The bond which holds together former militants of radical-left organisations and young people who had never before engaged in political activity, is an uncompromising determination to dismantle the capitalist society against whose police forces they had all fought in the streets.

The committee has no fixed membership: every individual who takes part in a daily meeting or action is a participating member. Anyone who thinks enough people have gathered together to constitute a meeting can preside; there is no permanent president. The order of the discussion is established at the beginning of the meeting; the subjects to be discussed can be proposed by any member. The committee is autonomous in the sense that it does not recognise the legitimacy of any 'higher' body or any 'external authority'. The committee's projects are not realisation of predetermined plans, but are responses to social situations. Thus a project comes to an end as soon as a situation changes, and a new project is conceived, discussed, and put into action in response to a new situation.

### *Internationalism*

Another leaflet was the first public announcement of the committee's uncompromising internationalism. 'Hundreds of thousands of foreign workers are imported like any other commodity useful to capitalism, and the government goes so far as to organise clandestine immigration from Portugal, thus unveiling itself as a slave-driver.'

The leaflet continues: 'All that has to end. The foreign workers contribute, through their labour, in the creation of the wealth of French society ... It is therefore – up to revolutionary workers and students to see to it that the foreign workers acquire the totality of their political and union rights. This is the concrete basis for internationalism.' ('Travailleurs Étrangers', Comité d'Action, Censier.)

At 6am on the morning of the occupation, when the Citroen workers approached their factories, they were greeted by young workers, students and teachers distributing the orange and green leaflets. On that morning, however, the young Action Committee militants were greeted by two surprises. First of all, they found the functionaries of the CGT (the communist union) calling for the occupation of the factory, and secondly, they were approached by the union functionaries and told to go home.

On previous days, the CGT had opposed the spreading strike wave and the occupation of the factories. Yet on the morning of the occupation, arriving workers who saw the union functionaries reading speeches into their loudspeakers at the factory entrances got the impression that the CGT functionaries were the ones who had initiated the strike.



However, the union, unlike the student movement and unlike the workers who had initiated the strike, was not calling for expropriation of the factories from their capitalist owners, or for the creation of a new society. Thus the functionaries of the communist union were calling for higher wages and improved working conditions, within the context of capitalist society. Thus the functionaries strenuously opposed the distribution of the Action Committee's leaflets, on the ground that their distribution would 'disrupt the unity of the workers' and would 'create confusion'.

The union functionaries did not spend too much time arguing with the Action Committee militants because the factory occupation did not take place as they had 'planned' it.

Sixty per cent of the labour force of the Citroen plants are foreign workers, and the vast majority of them are not in the CGT (nor in the smaller unions). When a small number of union members entered the factory in order to occupy it, they were kept out of the workshops by factory policemen placed inside by the owners. The vast majority of the foreign workers did not accompany the union members into the factory; the foreign workers stood outside and watched. The union officials made a great effort to translate the written speeches into some of the languages of the foreign workers. The foreign workers listened to the loudspeakers with indifference and at times even hostility.

### *Functionaries manoeuvre*

At that point the union officials stopped trying to chase away the Action Committee agitators; in fact, the officials decided to use the agitators. Among the agitators there were young people who spoke all the languages of the foreign workers, and the young people mingled freely with the foreign workers. On the other hand, the union officials, seasoned bureaucrats, were institutionally unable to speak directly to the workers: years of practice had made them experts at reading speeches into loudspeakers, and their loudspeakers were not leading to the desired effects.

Thus the functionaries began to encourage the young agitators to mix with the workers, to explain the factory occupation to them; the functionaries even gave the loudspeakers to some of the foreign members of the Action Committee. The result was that, after about two hours of direct communication between the foreign workers and the Action Committee members, most of the foreign workers were inside the factory, participating in its occupation.

Proud of their contribution to the occupation of Citroen, the Action Committee people went to the factory the following morning to talk

to the occupying workers. Once again they found themselves unwelcome. A large red flag flew outside the factory gate, but the young militants found the gate closed to them. At the entrances to the factories stood union officials who explained they were under strict orders (from the union's – and the CP's – central committee) not to let students or other outsiders inside the factory. The young agitators explained that they had played a crucial role in the factory's occupation, but the expression on the faces of the union functionaries merely hardened.

That evening the Citroen Action Committee had an urgent meeting. The committee's members were furious. Until now, they said, they had co-operated with the union; they had avoided an open confrontation. Their co-operative attitude had made no difference to the union officials; the committee militants had merely let themselves be used by the functionaries, and once used up, they were rejected. It was about time to confront the union openly. The Committee drafted a new leaflet, one which called on the workers to push past the union and take control of the factory into their own hands.

### *The leaflet*

"Workers, now you are the masters of your factory. You are no longer controlled by the owner or by the state. Be careful not to fall under the control of a new power," the leaflet begins. "All of you, French as well as foreign workers, have the right to talk. Don't let the loudspeakers talk for you ... Only you can decide what to produce, how much, and for whom. Don't let anyone take that power from you. If a group makes your decisions instead of you, if a group uses loudspeakers to yell to you what decisions 'we' reached, then this group does not seek to help you, but to control you." ("Travailleurs!" Comité d'Action Travailleurs – Étudiants, Censier.)

Due to the presence of union guards at the factory entrances, a relatively small number of workers read the leaflet. However, among these workers there were some who resented the union take-over inside the factory, and some who began attending the meetings of the Citroen Action Committee and participating in the political discussions at Sorbonne and Censier.

At this point the Citroen Committee, together with other action committees at the Sorbonne and Censier, composed a call for action of the workers inside the factories, 'The policy of the union is now very clear; unable to oppose the strike, they try to isolate the most militant workers inside the factories, and they let the strike rot so as to be able, later on, to force the workers to accept the agreements

which the unions will reach with the owners,' the leaflet explains. However, the leaflet continues, 'the political parties and the unions were not at the origin of the strike. The decisions were those of the strikers themselves, whether unionised or not. For this reason, the workers have to regain control over their work organisations. All strikers, unionised or not, unite in a Permanent General Assembly! In this Assembly, the workers themselves will freely determine their action and their goals.'

This call for the formation of General Assemblies inside the factories represents all appeal to expropriate the capitalist class, namely an appeal for insurrection. With the formation of a General Assembly (sometimes also called a Constituent Assembly) as the decision-making body inside the factory, the power of the state, the owner as well as the union, ceases to be legitimate. In other words, the General Assembly of all the workers in the factory becomes the only legitimate decision-making power; the state is bypassed, the capitalist is expropriated, and the union ceases to be the spokesman for the workers and becomes simply another pressure group inside the General Assembly.

Unable to communicate these ideas to the workers at the factory, the Citroen Action Committee drafted a new project. Since 60% of the factory's workers are foreign, and since the foreign workers live in special housing projects provided for them by the factory owners, the Citroen Action Committee decided to reach the foreign workers at their homes. The foreign workers were spending their days at their living quarters since they were no longer able to transport themselves to the factories (the transport to the factories is also furnished by the factory owners, and was obviously not being furnished during the strike).

Since this project was conceived during a period when transport was scarce in Paris, most of the participants had to hitch-hike to the housing centres. Several related projects were suggested by the Action Committee militants to the foreign workers. First of all the foreign workers were encouraged to help those strikers who were calling for worker-control of the factories, and not merely for wage rises. And secondly, the foreign workers were encouraged to organise themselves into action committees in order to cope with their own specific problems.

### ***Action Committee project***

The Action Committee's project initiated and stimulated various kinds of activities among the foreign workers. Courses were organised for

foreign workers who knew no French. At Nanterre for example, the occupation committee of the University there granted a room to a newly-formed action committee of Yugoslav workers. The room was used for political meetings and French lessons. In another centre, the workers organised to protect themselves collectively from abuses by the landlord's (namely Citroen's) agent at the housing centre. In some of the ghettos around Paris where workers had run out of food for their families trucks were found to transport food from peasants who contributed it at no cost. Contacts were established between the foreign workers and the revolutionary workers inside the factories. Foreign workers were encouraged to join French workers in the occupation of the factories. On each excursion to the living quarters, the Citroen Action Committee members told the foreign workers not to let themselves be used as strike breakers by the factory owners.

In all of the contacts between the Citroen Action Committee and foreign workers, the committee's internationalism was made clear to the foreign workers. When the committee members called for expropriation of the owners and the establishment of workers' power inside the factories, they emphasised that the power would be shared by all labourers who had worked in it, whether French or foreign. And when some foreign workers said they were only in France for a short time and would soon return home, the Action Committee militants answered that the goal of their movement was not to decapitate merely French capitalism, but to decapitate capitalism as such, and that thus, for the militants, the whole world was home.

**(taken from *Freedom*, 1968)**

## *Karl Young*

### **1968: From a different part of the forest**

Nearly everyone familiar with it, no matter what their political affiliations, credits the Ho Chi Minh Trail as one of the great engineering feats of human history. Perhaps it worked so well because of its seemingly endless complexity, with back-up systems within back-up systems behind alternatives in front of reinforcements, and so on. It was not *a* trail, it was more like a river system whose feeding streams merged with its delta, often in such a way that outsiders couldn't tell where they stood in the river, or even whether it had a beginning or an end.

Looking back at the '60s, and the major turning points of 1968, this bewildering system of passageways seems emblematic of the era. But there is an essential difference: the Ho Chi Minh Trail was carefully and single-mindedly planned to the last detail, even when that meticulous planning had to be improvised and re-routed under the most difficult circumstances. Those who constructed the Trail always knew exactly where they were and where they were going, and allowed nothing to distract them. The events of the time as they were played out in the US included many careful plans, and a great deal of improvisation, but they were often in hopeless conflict, and aside from those plans there were all sorts of unrelated and often chaotic forces working every which way at once.

#### ***Background: a hard rain, baby blue***

I was a 'victory baby', that is a child born during the two years following World War Two, the leading edge of what Americans call 'the baby boom'. To be a victory baby, you generally had to be the offspring of a veteran. In my case, both my parents were vets, and vets of an odd sort: my father had been a US army chaplain and my mother an army nurse-anaesthetist. They met on a train from Munich to Rome, after their tours of duty had taken them through an endless series of nightmares, including the concentration camp at Dachau. For me, the 'victory baby' classification has always had a bitter intensity that it may not have had for others. Still, the holocaust and its twin, the use of nuclear bombs on Japan, hovered in the psyches of my contemporaries. For thoughtful young people, the memory of the scapegoating and execution of two American Jews, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, and the McCarthyite terror

suggested that we, as the Bibles we read in Sunday school put it, 'became what we beheld'. One of our parents' mantras was that 'we must never let anything like Fascism happen again'. They had no idea how deeply some of us we would take this to heart.

Being a victory baby had a significance not dreamed of when people born immediately after the war came into the world: we would all come of legal age in the mid '60s, preceded by people who grew up with their fathers engaged in the war, and followed by the torrential 'baby boom'. As the heirs of World War Two, this manifested itself in a self-confidence that probably few generations of Americans have ever shared. Our parents, rich or poor, black or white, from the lowest ranking soldiers to the officers, from the civilians in war industries to those who had contributed to the war effort in a myriad of ways, all shared in the victory. They had fought a war on two fronts, had taken on the world – and won. Not only did this give them a sense of great strength, it gave them a sense of moral authority: in defeating Fascism they had triumphed over evil. In the climate of my childhood and early adolescence, the legion of disasters bred by the war were kept out of the picture, and only the virtues entered public discourse. The euphoria of victory carried with it an odd sense of timing: if Yankees could achieve victory on this scale in less than four years, certainly they could fix just about anything quickly if they put their minds to it.

When social problems insisted themselves ever more dramatically in the '60s, we had the confidence that we could not only solve them, but solve them quickly, and, in fact, were obliged to do so. We did this in different ways. As the Vietnam war escalated, the same confidence that led some young people to oppose the war lead others to fight courageously and selflessly in it, even though it was in a country they'd never heard of. Those who took part in the civil rights movement shared in the same confidence.

A boom economy drew larger and larger numbers of people out of poverty into the middle class. The advent of oral contraceptives gave everyone who wanted it the opportunity to engage in the kind of sex lives previously reserved for the aristocracy, and the ease of treating venereal disease gave us an advantage not enjoyed by the lords and ladies of former eras. Huge areas of art and culture came from all directions and worked their way into many strata of society. Above all, musical forms (no, not just rock) proliferated rapidly. Everything from Zen Buddhism to French Existentialism thrived not only among the intelligentsia, they also worked their way into many areas of pop culture.

The wave of confidence brought severe undertones with it. Young people grew up expecting new wars – including another world war – to break out at any moment, and all of us to some extent feared the nuclear war that seemed inevitable. In school, we were regularly put through drills to prepare us for the moment. Crouching under our desks or marching down to the basement and facing the wall while our teachers crooned that there was no real danger set up odd contradictions in our minds. Most of us had dreams of waking up in a world in which all other people had vanished. Sometimes the nuclear threat took odd turns: many of us used fallout shelters as play forts if we could get into them, and photos of test blasts fascinated us – to the point where mushroom clouds actually looked beautiful. After we spent a week literally on the verge of nuclear annihilation during the Cuban Missile Crisis, many of us felt the need to take action in some tangible way, not necessarily in the anti-nuclear movement. Many of us simply decided that we would never, never, never allow ourselves to remain helpless again, even if our lives could still be gambled with by lunatics holding dick waving contests. This channelled some of us into the civil rights movement, personal liberties, and other political and social action. As Bob Dylan summed it up in the best response to the Cuban Missile Crisis, even if a hard rain was going to fall, we were going to experience life to the max. In effect, the Cuban Missile crisis produced something like a psychic nuclear reaction. When a slow burning anxiety turns to unmediated terror, it can unleash enormous energy.

During and after the crisis, young whites were becoming more aware of the racism so deeply ingrained in US culture and history. Many of us had grown up racist ourselves, but, like many older people, what this meant was becoming more difficult to live with. As high school students, we listened to rock music, and knew it was largely a black art. We listened to it constantly, often sleeping with plugs from transistor radios in our ears. The news came at the top of every hour, and nearly every hour brought news of racial violence, particularly in the south – for a while, news of the Congo rebellion seemed nearly indistinguishable from reports from Mississippi. Just as important were the images that came from television. It's one thing to make stupid jokes, but it's another to see a mob of adults with murder in their eyes dementedly howling while troops escort a couple of ten to twelve year old black kids through the mob and into a school. And it's even more moving to note that although those kids are visibly scared as they walk, they've got a kind of courage and

determination that shames our privileged positions. Surrounding the pictures of rioting, burning or blown up buildings, people being beaten senseless by a mob for sitting at a whites-only lunch counter, there were the movies that showed heroes behaving like black people and villains behaving precisely like whites on the news. We were constantly lectured on the virtues of our free society, but obviously this concealed massive lies – blacks were anything but free, and our parents were imposing a curious repression on themselves. We bought the idea of freedom, but we also knew that it was something that wasn't here and needed to be implemented.

Other lies became more apparent: endless lectures and educational films told us that marijuana turned people into raving lunatics, and that a couple tokes of grass led inevitably to incurable heroin addiction. All we needed was a few tokes of weed to know that we were the victims of a massive disinformation campaign. For more thoughtful kids, world events exposed vast layers of hypocrisy. The US had urged Hungary to rebel against Soviet domination in 1956, yet left the Hungarians to fight alone when the Russian tanks started to roll. The US claimed to support democracy in the world, yet clearly undermined it in places as different as Guatemala and Iran.

Our parents had grown up during the worst economic depression the country had seen, and then gone off to the bloodiest war in human history. To some extent, most of our parents were traumatised by this background, and although they tried to escape into the conformity and relative prosperity of the post-war years, they often felt they were missing something in their lives, an absence often made more painful by not knowing its source. Many simultaneously feared losing what they'd gained and also dissatisfied with those same gains. Although people kept it hidden as much as possible, family violence was common, alcoholism ran rampant, psychological disorders of all kinds proliferated and were made worse by attempts to keep them in the closet.

People more or less my age grew up not only with a sense of great self-confidence, but also a sense of impending disaster. Both forces played out in as many different configurations as there were individuals in which they could operate, and these two warring states of mind keyed us up for the social upheavals of the '60s. When they came, they came in as many diverse forms as there were people to experience them.

I've read books and watched television documentaries on the period, all trying to reduce it to something coherent and tangible, something that could be encapsulated in a simple formula. I've



watched people try to teach one-semester courses in '60s studies and seen people who were part of the period engage in this sort of reductionism, and been disgusted by what I saw. One of the things most painful to me in the last decade has been watching people my age try to fit themselves into the stereotypes that the media and the educational-industrial complex concocted. Perhaps the most important characteristic of the period is that it can't be explained. And perhaps in this it insists that less dramatic periods of history should admit to analysis, but analysis should *always* be tentative, as a stimulant or a restraint, but never a closed case. In 'Cowboys and Indians: The Dumbing Down of American Myths', published in a previous issue of this magazine, I discussed the problems of the historical reductionism of the nineteenth century, much of it coming in the wake of the Civil War of the 1860s. In this essay I'm discussing a period of American history in which I took part, and the dumbing down of a history that I have watched since that time ended.

1968 was a pivotal year in the '60s. There's no way to present all the great complexity of the time, and the last thing I want to do is support the cartoons of the period that flow abundantly from books, university courses, and television programs. But some of the events of the year bear a great deal of significance in themselves, and also act as markers in the great stormy ocean of foment. The slow and serene picking apart of the era belongs to the culture of the '90s, not of the '60s. All that happened between the Tet Offensive at the beginning of 1968 and the Battle of Chicago in August seemed to collapse historical epochs into the blink of an eye. For many of us, the public events of those months were inextricably tied up with dramatic personal adventures, traumas, accidents, triumphs, failures, accomplishments, uncertainties, hopes, fears, possibilities, bouts of despair and elation. Conjunctions of life came at us so fast that we never seemed to catch our breath. It seemed like a marathon race, run without knowing the course, with constant diversions, with obstacles rising in front of us and changes washing across us, falling on top of us, opening under our feet, at an ever increasing pace. Without a strong awareness of the speed, intensity, and complexity of the era, nothing you can say about it makes sense.

### *The Tet Offensive*

Let's begin the year on 30th January, the beginning of Tet, the Chinese New Year observed by many Vietnamese. Both sides in the conflict agreed to observe a cease-fire for this holiday, though both planned to break it. The communist forces made best use of the

truce by launching one of their most daring campaigns of the war. Shortly after the cease-fire began, they initiated over a hundred simultaneous and well coordinated attacks on US and South Vietnamese positions. Many sites were overrun, cities like the former capitol, Hue, were taken, and part of the US embassy was occupied briefly by one group of commandos. In the three months that followed most sites were re-taken and the communists suffered enormous casualties, but this campaign proved the turning point of the war, after which communist victory became inevitable.

The US claimed it a resounding victory to both the American troops in Vietnam and civilians in the US. Some people in the government and the army may have been so divorced from reality that they actually believed that the capitalist forces had won – this was an era of hallucinations not confined to people who took drugs. Those who adamantly supported the war in the US reiterated the official line. But most people didn't believe it. If part of the US embassy could be taken, anything could. For the hawks, something unthinkable was happening: in World War Two the US took on the world and won. Now it was getting itself kicked silly by one of the poorest countries on earth. For them, this called for victory at any cost. For the counterculture, it suggested that even small numbers of people could take on the strongest power in the world and win. If the Vietnamese could prevail over the US, the relatively small counterculture could change capitalist society from the ground up.

The US troops in Vietnam were not in any way a homogeneous group. Some went because they believed that it was their moral obligation. Some went because they felt they had to prove themselves in their families or communities. Many went because they were drafted and had no strong feeling about the war one way or another – their fathers had fought, so the natural order of things seemed for them to do the same. Among impoverished populations, particularly minorities, the military offered one of the few ways of making more than a subsistence living, and even held out opportunities for advancement that could be found nowhere else. Some went because they had been arrested for minor crimes, and judges had given them the option of prison or military service. Many enlisted because they thought they could get an easier position if they volunteered, perhaps even an assignment to Germany or somewhere else where there was no fighting.

However they got there, the soldiers found themselves in a more perplexing position than they could have imagined. It was never very clear who the enemy was. The troops found the South Vietnamese

military hard to understand, and this lack of understanding encouraged the sense that they couldn't trust a 'gook' no matter what kind of uniform he wore. Black, Latino and Native American soldiers wondered why they should fight for the freedom of these people when that same freedom was denied them at home.

The war seemed a different war wherever a soldier found himself: the war fought from the boats in the Mekong Delta seemed unrelated to that fought in the rice paddies which was a different war than the one fought in the mountains. The world of high altitude bomber crews seemed unrelated to anything else, while the pilots and crews of lower flying planes and helicopters saw a different war altogether. Orders given in clear violation of everything from the troops' religious upbringing to their basic training in the army to the Geneva Conventions to the claims of the military itself and to plain common sense and decency increased the sense of distrust and insecurity among the troops. At the same time, their anger at the death of their fellows encouraged outrage not always directed at the enemy. Something close to civil wars raged among US troops, including a slow-burning, uncoordinated mutiny that had no way of ending. In some platoons, black and white troops got along well, but as 1968 wore on, the tension between the races grew, in some cases breaking out into violence within the US army itself. The war between the men and their officers may have been more intense. In 1968, over 900 army officers (including sergeants) were 'fragged', that is executed in a thinly disguised manner by the men in their commands, often by a fragmentation grenade thrown into a bunker or latrine. The officers had their own war on the troops, sometimes carried out by assassins in 'the company'. Propaganda and other official military statements completely contradicted what the men knew was happening, which encouraged the belief that they couldn't trust the command structure. Many claimed that they were issued defective equipment. In the minds of many troops, the army was more interested in making money through sweet deals within the military-industrial complex than in their safety or their ability to win the war.

Drug use among troops rose in 1968. This had started with enterprising GIs going into business with the aid of local suppliers and contacts in various parts of the international air lanes. At the mildest, the command structure tolerated the use of drugs as a palliative. Drug distribution tended to follow tasks: the grunts in the hills and paddies stayed stoned on marijuana and opiates, the pencil pushers in Saigon wound through the days on amphetamines, while

the aristocrats of the military, the pilots, soared above the war with noses full of cocaine. The troops found themselves in another strange dilemma: they needed the dope to fight the psychological pressures of the war, but they also knew that drugs made them less effective fighters and more likely to be killed.

Hawks in the US lived in another world altogether. Some had no use for returning vets, who, in their view, bore a significant responsibility for losing the war. These hawks often hated the counterculture more than they did the Vietnamese communists, and felt the returning vets betrayed them in the face of their enemies at home. By 1968, many troops did not know if they would be welcomed home by either those who supported the war or those who opposed it. Hasty marriages before induction left many insecure as to whether their wives would accept them, if they had not gone farther and taken other partners in their absence.

Many older hawks modulated into moderates. Something I heard over and over through the war years was World War Two vets who supported the war, but thought their own sons shouldn't have to fight it, since they'd done enough to take care of the family's obligations for several generations. As with many vets, older hawks often supported the war but not the way it was conducted. Some could even make common cause with anti-war factions on specific issues. From the beginning, many seeming hawks had actually opposed the war, but sought a way out that would not make the US seem weak. The different positions of hawks took many other courses, but one thing is certain: Tet simultaneously increased extreme positions and confusion.

According to the reductionism now current, and part of the television stereotypes of the day, the vets and the counterculture were two separate orders of being, between which no communication could take place. This is plain nonsense. True, friction of all sorts surrounded the two groups, ending friendships and causing inter- and intra-family wars. And many vets felt betrayed by the counterculture and stayed within sub-communities that kept out all opposition, just as some hipsters avoided vets completely. But this was not universal. Speaking from the counterculture side, the vets were our high school buddies, our schoolmates in college, our family members, and as important as anything else, our contemporaries. Many vets who came home believing the war was justified and should continue made separate truces with some young people who disagreed. Most returning vets wanted to find someplace to fit in, a way back into a normal life.

Some could do this in mainstream society, but many could not. A fair number found that their experience in the war made them more able to relate to the counterculture than to any other stratum of society. One of the oddest terms of rapprochement was over drugs. Many vets wanted or needed a continued supply of drugs, and the counterculture provided the best place to obtain them. Drug supplies moved along a two-way street. Many troops sent drugs home to friends, and those who had started drug businesses in Vietnam continued them, often successfully, when they came home. By 1968, significant drug traffic came through military channels.

Returning vets told us that the conditions of the war, from problems in the military to the futility of the war to atrocities committed on all sides, even by them, were worse than those we had imagined or read about in the mainstream press. Although not reported in the press until the next year, on 16th March 1968, US troops under the command of Lieutenant William Calley massacred approximately five hundred unarmed civilian men, women, and children at the village of My Lai. Seeing the action from a distance Lt. Hugh Thompson set his helicopter down between an oncoming group of US troops and a cluster of villagers, and ordered his men to train their heavy machine-guns on the advancing US troops, saving the lives of the Vietnamese. Whether Thompson's men could have brought themselves to fire on their compatriots had they rushed the helicopter may be questionable. Thompson's heroism is not. I never heard of anything on the scale of My Lai, but returning vets told us of many Calleys and a share of Thompsons. Their descriptions of napalm and phosphorus burns made the news photos seem underestimates.

Whatever their feelings regarding the rightness of the war, many – I believe most – vets were disgusted and embittered by the way it was conducted. Some took part casually in anti-war activities, often just to check out the scene or to see if they could pick up girls. A smaller but more decisive group became active in anti-war organisations and started several of their own, most notably Vietnam Veterans Against the War. After Tet, most demonstrations included vets. This not only carried great symbolic value, but some of the most effective demonstrations were conducted primarily or solely by vets, who renounced the war, the military, the government, and their hard-won medals, which they often threw at national monuments or public figures. Photos of demonstrators who had fought in the war made great propaganda. As demonstrations grew more intense, 'vets to the front' was not just a call for the benefit of the cameras, but also for

a wall of demonstrators who could hold or advance the line against the police. Sending city cops in against seasoned veterans was one of the oddest of the many misjudgments made by the authorities. Most vets were good at holding the line, without fighting back, but when they did, the police didn't stand a chance. Two vets could easily pull a masked policeman in riot gear off a horse in a cloud of tear-gas and have him incapacitated in a matter of minutes. Helicopters, sometimes used in crowd control, had a significance for vets that made their resistance more adamant. Of course, this was a time when nothing was consistent. Some vets who took part in anti-war activities later recanted or felt they were being used by the anti-war movement just as they had been used by the military, and pulled more and more into their own circles of fellow vets, adding to the sense of isolation among some vets decades later.

With increasing violence in response to demonstrations and other actions, dedicated activists found they shared a milder version of a condition familiar to Nam vets. Marching around with signs, perhaps going through a ritual run down a street with police swinging clubs just for form's sake, not intending to hit anybody was one thing, the confrontations that escalated in 1968 were becoming something else. Protesters usually had little sleep for several days before serious confrontations, which often, in turn, went on for days. The effects of sleep deprivation combined with the hormonal rushes of fear and rage produced something like a painful high. The sense that any move could be the wrong one, putting you under a club, brass knuckles, cleated boots focused everything intensely on the moment, all life is right now and right now only. Something similar went on among the police. News footage of violent confrontations tends to have no sound track or a very poor one: an unforgettable, though largely unrecorded dimension of them is that they included bellowing and screaming matches.

From the beginning, the anti-war movement had included people outside the counterculture. In the early days, these were primarily religious objectors. One of the many odd collisions of the time was the overlap of the war with Vatican II, and a priesthood and lay factions within the church in a state of radical change and aggressiveness. Another group whose numbers swelled greatly in 1968 consisted of friends, parents, and other relatives of soldiers killed in Vietnam. This cut two ways, and many people changed positions through the period. Some gung ho patriots, hoping to see their sons come home as decorated heroes instead of corpses in body bags, changed their minds several times in their grief, which often

grew more severe with the passage of time. Sometimes they responded to the loss by joining anti-war factions; sometimes, by moving from moderates to extremist hawks. The father of my first high school friend killed in the war joined the draft board, apparently to make sure that no one else would escape risking the loss he had suffered. Others wanted nothing so much as to take out their rage on any man wearing a uniform. The rapid escalation of troops after '66 brought with it a rapid escalation in casualties, and a commensurate increase in casualties. Many people began changing their minds about the significance of the war, often going through periods of both patriotic fervour and rage against the war. This ambivalence generated an enormous amount of energy, and escalated the tensions felt throughout the country.

### *The assassination of Martin Luther King*

On 4th April, as the Tet Offensive wound its way down, the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, Jr was assassinated.

If the implications of the Tet Offensive were shrouded in confusion and uncertainty, the immediate response to the murder of Dr King was swift and unequivocal. Major riots broke out in 126 cities, and smaller acts of insurrection took place in hundreds more. Race riots and burning cities had erupted throughout the country every summer for several years, culminating in 1967. Everyone had at least seen them on television, and many had seen them at first hand or at a slight remove. During the previous summer, the city of Milwaukee had responded to rioting by bringing in troops to enforce a curfew around the inner city. A number of friends and I kept vigil on the roof of my apartment building about a mile from the epicentre. It's easy enough to say and to imagine, but hearing gunfire and seeing huge flames reflected from the clouds at night while army jeeps stood at every corner and troops patrolled the streets below leaves an indelible impression on your psyche. Curiously, the summer riots more or less played themselves out after '67. Although law enforcement officers, politicians, etc. claimed credit for this, black communities had pretty much come to the conclusion that in their totally justified rage, trashing the slums into which they had been pushed did them no good. But the murder of Dr King was too much to expect anyone to bear quietly. The murder of the strongest symbol of hope and optimism the country produced brought with it the sense that those qualities had been assassinated too.

Tensions had built steadily for several years among African American activists. Some, such as the Black Muslims, advocated

separatism and the annihilation or expulsion of all white people. Malcolm X preached a totally uncompromising doctrine of radical change that included all races in the solution. He was assassinated by Black Muslims for this, and some people initially thought that Dr King's assassin might have been black. After his death, the ideas of Malcolm X continued to inform more radical groups who adopted his position that the goals of African Americans should not simply be sought through nonviolent resistance, but insisted that "Our objective is complete freedom, complete justice, complete equality, *by any means necessary*".

With increasing militancy, many activist considered Dr King a figure whose time had passed. But this did nothing to diminish his stature as a major figure in the struggle. Still, in April, the majority of African Americans rejected mass violence as an answer to their problems, even though their rage inevitably lead to riots when conditions became intolerable. Many realised that the psychological jujitsu of Dr King, the bringing of relatively small-scale violence on themselves did more to defeat Jim Crow than could be accomplished any other way. In fact, given their smaller numbers and lower economic status, violence on their part usually meant retaliation on a huge scale, as it always had before. For many African Americans, King's assassination left the nonviolent wing of the civil rights movement rudderless at a time when it was rushing into white water rapids. Some felt consternation, and a period of paralysis set in among them. Many moved into more radical positions. Initially nonviolent organisations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee took on a strong military cast. For many black activists, King's assassination seemed a refutation of his principals and methods, and his death increased their ranks and the persuasiveness of their arguments. For the overwhelming majority of African Americans, the assassination indicated that white America could not tolerate peaceful change. If it insisted on snuffing out this beacon of peaceful change, could it tolerate *anything* from blacks?

Three summers of extensive rioting had left many whites feeling extremely uneasy. An odd result of the ghettoisation of blacks was the creation of something like African fortresses in the hearts of most cities. These could be used as military bases in a new revolutionary war, as many African American radical groups had claimed. In many, the Black Panthers, a highly trained and disciplined group, acted as a citizen's army, patrolling the streets heavily armed. Huey P. Newton and several other cadres armed with shotguns had forced police to back down and retreat in the summer of '67, and by '68



Newton was charged with the killing of a policeman. All-black towns throughout the country could function as auxiliary posts in the war. The word 'revolution' had been tossed around by both black and white groups for years. King's assassination and the rioting that followed seemed to move the word out of the realms of theory and rhetoric, making revolution seem a real possibility, if not an inevitable outcome of the course events had followed in recent years. Rallying cries such as 'burn baby, burn' sunk deeply into the psyches of all concerned, not just white conservatives – it encouraged African Americans to see revolution as possible and no worse than what they had to endure anyway, and white radicals began thinking of revolution in more concrete terms. Many middle Americans began arming themselves, and giving greater support to the police, the FBI, and other organisations. This came not only in the form of greater funding, but also encouragement of more brutal tactics, stepped up activities against all dissident faction, and the suspension of constitutionally based civil liberties. Police used the power given them by fear of revolution to circumvent legal restraints and to go after targets ranging from political and social groups of all sorts, to people they didn't like for any reason whatsoever, often enough arresting them on bogus charges. Their tactics ranged from simple beatings to relatively subtle psychological assaults. The FBI and CIA joined in. Again, druggies weren't alone in hallucinations. Looking through FBI files activists later obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, you can see officers carefully noting that "negroes were seen" entering the houses of activists as though black people associating with whites spelled mass destruction. Sometimes blacks were labelled "outside agitator" in the cities in which they had spent their lives. Accounts of surveillance often sound like out-takes of scenes from b-grade spy movies and cloak-and-dagger novels. But there was nothing unreal about the sense of fear stepped-up harassment engendered, or the way it pushed people into more extreme positions or the way it seemed to justify revolution and at the same time make it seem inevitable.

To many in middle America, a police state, precisely what the US had fought against in World War Two now seemed preferable to a civil war that could erupt from everywhere at once, much as the Tet Offensive had done. Some communities set up clandestine arms caches and unacknowledged militias. Membership in white racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan increased in the north, as it had in the south earlier in the decade. It now seems unlikely that police and other law enforcement agencies established large paramilitary groups,

like the death squads of Latin America, ready to attack individuals or to form a separate army if necessary, but talk of such organisations was certainly in the air. Reports from the '70s reveal that rumours and fears of 'emergency detention centres', i.e., concentration camps, were not paranoid delusions but actually in place. In some locations, the police and military took overt action. Most noticeably, after the murder of Dr King and the subsequent riots, the security forces that had guarded the White House in ever larger number were augmented by the deployment of federal troops around the building. The congress was guarded not only by security forces around its perimeter, it featured machine-gun installations at its entrances. Similar actions were taken in many state capitols and even police stations and court houses. The offices of the US government were taking on the character of the American Embassy in Saigon. Could a squad of commandos succeed in taking it, too?

***Lyndon Johnson's announcement that he would not seek re-election and the assassination of Robert Kennedy***

On 31st March, between the King and Kennedy assassinations, Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election. Johnson had been an enigma. He had put through more truly progressive legislation than any president in the country's history, actually doing many of the things that President Kennedy had tried to do or pretended to advocate. Even among Anarchists, the gains, however limited, of the Civil Rights Act, the War on Poverty, Medicare, and other initiatives mattered and gained some respect. Yet this same man had concocted the Gulf of Tonkin Incident to justify the first massive troop build-up in Vietnam, and had continued to prosecute the war beyond all reason. The dichotomy profoundly undercut any sense of trust and credibility in the presidency, and made reconciliation seem closer to impossibility. In the low-rent, youth-dominated neighbourhood where I lived at the time of Johnson's announcement, people set up a stereo system in the street and danced to celebrate the event. The few residents who objected were hooted down, and the party went on a good deal of the night. Nothing in Johnson's resignation suggested a successor would end the war: this festivity simply demonstrated the depth of the hatred for Johnson and the war.

It also indicated the naiveté of the celebrants. But this wasn't clear at the moment. The resignation made way for Eugene McCarthy to make a more successful bid with an anti-war stand. Shortly after that, Robert Kennedy threw his hat into the ring, also claiming that

he sought an end to the war. This claim vacillated through his brief campaign, ringing false for many liberals and most radicals. But Robert shared his brother's charisma, perhaps exceeding him in the kind of optimism he radiated and the hope he inspired. Neither Kennedy had earned this, and neither could claim to have come close to Johnson's accomplishments, but, still, many people desperately wanted to believe in something. Some saw the younger brother as special, perhaps the fulfilment of the promise that had failed to materialise through his brother. Perhaps he could to a small extent heal the despair felt after the death of Martin Luther King. Robert's ability to bring people with diverse and hostile positions together brought new hope to much of the centre and even to a few radicals. In speech after speech he repeated: "Some men see things as they are and ask 'Why?' I dream things that never were and say 'Why not?'" This summed up the aspirations of the counter-culture as well as the spirit of many other Americans. Even if he was a Kennedy, he actually could have meant it.

On 6th June, while celebrating his victory in the California primary, virtually assuring the Democratic Party's nomination, and possibly victory in the upcoming presidential election, Robert Kennedy was shot. He died less than 24 hours later, while millions waited in agony. The greatest significance of this event was the timing of the assassination itself. The execution of John Kennedy was such a singular event that virtually every American old enough to be aware of what was happening, still, in 1998, remembers where they were and what they were doing when they first heard the news. For many, the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 seemed a mirror of the first Kennedy assassination, which Malcolm had dismissed as "the chickens coming home to roost." For the left, both black and white, Malcolm's death seemed a blow to both black unity and the search for radical solutions outside simple black/white dichotomies. But coming so soon after the execution of Dr King, the timing of Robert Kennedy's slaying made it seem to nearly everyone that the pace of assassination was escalating along with everything else. At this point, many wondered who would be next. Would this lead to weekly assassinations? Would it precipitate a military dictatorship under marshal law? Even those who had not been harassed by the police and FBI had seen soldiers in the streets, the government's offices surrounded by troops and machine-guns – we were more than half way to a police state already.

For some people in virtually every part of the political spectrum, it signaled the true globalisation of political action. Kennedy had been

killed by a Palestinian, and though this might have been the only political assassination of the era that didn't have a conspiracy behind it, even one of the most powerless peoples on earth could strike at the heart of America. This increased the uneasiness and sense of vulnerability for conservatives and liberals alike, supercharging the significance of the accelerating rate of assassinations.

It may seem a bit odd given the more fixed ideological positions of the '90s, but up to this assassination many on the left, including the radical left, still desired compromise *if it meant* ending the war, re-focusing effort on civil rights, and continuing the real gains of the Johnson administration in entitlements, health care, the war on poverty, and possibly even civil rights. This was a time of crises, and most people put a higher priority on solutions than ideologies, no matter what their rhetorical position. For segments of the counter-culture, it meant the end of any ideas of reconciliation, that the counter-culture now stood alone, with no allies, no one to bargain with or rely on as a mediator between it and what it called 'Amerikkka'. Many on the traditional left saw no hope in the mainstream and moved into the counter-culture. Clearly electoral democracy had ceased to function.

### ***The battle of Chicago***

There have always been diverse and sometimes contradictory strains in Anarchism, just as there were in the counterculture of the '60s. The parallel shouldn't be surprising: different Anarchist traditions, movements, and impulses influenced virtually every strain of the counterculture to some extent. The temper of the time, however, left little room for doctrinal purity, and most movements within the counter-culture worked out anarchist strains with ideas, examples, and hybrids with other sources of all sorts. In August 1968, many counterculture strands came together, on a collision course not only with conservatives but also with other radical political and social orientations.

Late in 1997, the National Mobilisation Committee to End the War in Vietnam, or Mobe, began planning a massive demonstration for the next summer's Democratic Party convention in Chicago. Although one of its original goals was to defeat Lyndon Johnson, after Johnson's withdrawal from the race it still hoped such a demonstration could help mobilise anti-warriors to force an end to the war and a return to issues of poverty, civil rights, and personal liberty. The significance of Chicago increased after the murder of Martin Luther King, when Mayor Richard Daley's 'shoot to kill'

policy in riot control proved the most violent of police reactions to rioting of any city in the country. During the months that followed, Chicago made the most concerted effort to attack and break up any type of demonstration, including the most sober protests made by religious and mainstream civic groups. According to some sources, the city required at least one arrest of each police officer assigned to demonstration duty, even if none of the protesters had broken any law. From the beginning, Mobe took an almost fatalistic view of what to expect in Chicago – not only anticipating violence, but also feeling that Chicago had become the centre for the formation of the new police state and hence the highest priority for action.

Mobe grew out of SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, which in turn took its origins, in part, from the Anarcho-Syndicalist activism of the pre-war years. In 1960, SDS activated itself, and in 1961 issued the Port Huron Statement, a manifesto that combined traditional Syndicalism with methods and goals tried and articulated by the burgeoning civil rights movement. In a sense, SDS made up a largely white, northern wing of the predominantly black and southern Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, with which it sometimes cooperated. SDS shared a dedicated though stormy connection with mainstream organised labour. Its membership consisted primarily of students, other academics, and some activists who also belonged to other organisations. Changing its methods according to immediate needs, SDS made significant progress in organising social programs, ranging from housing and de-segregation to liberation from the repression of bourgeois society. After the mid '60s, it took on a more militant caste, but remained an orderly and focused group, as was its offshoot, Mobe.

In February 1968, a loose group including Jerry Rubin, Ed Sanders, Abbie Hoffman, and Paul Krassner formed the Youth International Party, or Yippies. Perhaps true to form, the acronym came first, and the formal name was devised to fit it. Shortly after its formation, the Yippies announced that they would convene a 'Festival of Life' at the Chicago convention. Mobe's plans focused on nonviolent demonstrations and recruitment, with some guerrilla theatre, including an 'unbirthday' for Lyndon Johnson. The Yippie goal was complete disruption and the kind of confrontation that the authorities would not know how to deal with. Perhaps the most important tactic was the presidential candidate they put forward, a pig.

The Yippies followed a different lineage than Mobe, including both the original seventeenth century British Diggers, and their twentieth century American resurrection. The seventeenth century Diggers

believed that God had given man the earth as a 'common treasury', and the root of all evil came from dividing God's gift into private properties. To solve this problem, they began to 'dig', that is to work the land, without the permission or consent of anyone claiming ownership or legal authority. In the late nineteenth and twentieth century, this same strategy would re-emerge among Anarchists as 'Direct Action'.

Like their namesake, the twentieth century American Diggers refused to petition anyone for anything because this acknowledged the authority of those in positions of power. Diggers dug, not acknowledging any authority. But 'digging' took on a second meaning in the resurrected group – it also meant to 'dig the scene'. This included the need to overcome all forms of repression and to let the unleashed and unrestrained subconscious of all people reform the condition of society. In urban environments, the Diggers staged guerrilla theatre ranging from cramming streets with people carrying giant puppets to the ceremonial burning large sums of money to giving away 'liberated' food without concealing its source. Despite the crazy mystique of the Diggers, they tended to enforce an internal discipline by the demands of their basic premises. Those who couldn't live up to them slipped out into other streams of the counterculture. Rural Digger communes showed a somewhat different face: of the groups who adopted subsistence farming, the Diggers probably represented the hardest working and most single minded.

The Yippies diverged from the Digger variety of Direct Action primarily by seeking rapid recruitment and quick solutions to large scale problems, and by courting media attention. One of the basic Digger freedoms was "freedom from fame and recognition" – for them, fame and recognition compromised individual liberty and the free workings of the subconscious. Diggers often exchanged names on a regular basis or gave multiple people the same name. Although a few won attention, their goal included anonymity. Rubin and Hoffman loved to manipulate the media, often with outrageous put-ons. Their proposal to introduce LSD into the Chicago water system particularly frightened the police, and Daley ordered the water system guarded to prevent this, even though 'stoning the city' had never been seriously planned by anyone. LSD proved an odd bird coming home to roost. The US military invented it as a weapon, and now felt the need to guard its own cities from the monster it created. For the counterculture, stunts like this were easy to pull, but their cost in the long run was high.

Other counter-culture strains came into the picture to further complicate the situation. For brevity's sake, we can list them as follows: Orgs, organisations that resembled either Mobe or the Yippies to a greater or lesser extent, but disagreed on some points; Hippies, people who liked some dope and sex and a particular style of clothing and coiffure, but felt no serious commitments. Separatist of several sorts: Drop-outs, people who removed themselves from any form of society other than their immediate companions through massive amounts of drugs and/or a numbing sexual hyperactivity; Homesteaders, people who set up cells or collectives of various sizes, located in rural settings from isolated positions in the west to agricultural areas in the midwest and east to urban cells in some cities. Though they usually kept their distance from political actions, Separatists came to Chicago as a result of the rapid escalation of the war, or their sense of intensifying police pressure that began to threaten their semi-autonomous condition, or because the assassinations and riots of the spring made them feel uneasy in their separatism. Finally, Seekers, people who found no place in any of these groups, though often had affiliations with a number of them. This last category shades into one of the major problems of describing or making generalisations about the period. Most people in the counterculture changed affiliations at least once, and different groups interacted with each other.

Virtually all groups had sub-groups, offshoots, and counterparts. The Motherfuckers, for instance, seemed close to the Diggers. Based initially in New York, they took direct action against the police. According to one of several stories, they took their name from the police, who grabbed suspects' arms, twisted them behind their backs, and used the arms as a lever to smash their faces into the nearest hard surface, shouting "up against the wall, motherfucker." This group tailed police, photographing and otherwise documenting their activities, and wherever possible intervening in them in any way they could. Obviously an extremely dangerous activity, the group's membership remained minuscule, but it did help form and support affinity groups.

Numerous groups outside the counter-culture (ranging from religious to guild to mainstream minority and environmental organisations) sent demonstrators to the convention.

Tensions throughout the world seemed to reinforce those in the US. The beginning to the barricades in France more or less coincided with the Battle of Morningside Heights, a massive student take-over of buildings at Columbia University in New York. Many looked

toward France with something like envy. The extent of police harassment and infiltration couldn't compare with its US counterpart, despite a few days of barricades, overturned cars, etc. Ironically, the US inherited its largest problem, the Vietnam war, from France. Without the concurrent civil rights struggle, and with a more unified culture, the terms of engagement seemed simpler. Oddly, the counterculture envied the French students' alliance with labour, though it seemed hell bent on alienating American labour. The Cultural Revolution raged in China, sending out confusing signals. To the counterculture, the rustication of police officers, the marching of bureaucrats around in dunce caps, and the takeover of universities hid the dictatorship behind them, and some, particularly those who liked its tough rhetoric, proclaimed themselves Maoists without knowing what that meant. The Black Panthers grafted Maoist ideas onto their Leninist base. Czechoslovakia had made a bid for radical change, seeming to make significant progress through the spring, but Soviet and Warsaw Pact tanks moved to crush Czechoslovakia's resistance on 20th August, less than a week before the opening of the convention. The Marxism of American radicals was usually Trotskyist, with virtually no sympathy for Soviet colonialism, and saw the six thousand National Guard and Regular Army troops shipped into Chicago to guard the convention as an Army of occupation parallel to the one that had just invaded Hungary. A number of the people heading toward the convention city called it Czechoslocago.

At least ten thousand demonstrators converged on Chicago as the convention began, on 25th August, many of them crowding into the city's parks. Dancing, partying, engaging in exhibitionistic but harmless play in the parks seemed like the beginning of the Festival of Love promoted by the Yippies. On the second night, the police flooded Lincoln Park with tear-gas, chased counter-culturists out of the park, and attacked them on the street. Some fought back and were joined by 'park people', a sort of Marcusean column made up of bikers, street toughs, and others who simply wanted a fight. This went on sporadically through miles of city streets, bringing tear-gas and beatings, often of people who were not part of any demonstration.

On Wednesday a minor fracas in Grant Park lead to a massive and well coordinated police charge on the demonstrators there. They disbursed, but regrouped and made a determined attempt to march through the police to the convention centre. They were surrounded by police and National Guardsmen and after a concerted struggle in



a running battle, broke through to Michigan Avenue. There they joined demonstrators from The Poor People's Campaign, marching to the hotel where the delegates were housed. Before they got there, the police in the vicinity of the hotel started systematically clubbing and macing demonstrators of all sorts, as well as journalists and people who just happened to be in the area. News of the police charges reached the delegates, and a number of them called for a recess until the police could be restrained. This led to debates within the convention, some calling the police Nazis and Gestapo, some defending the police. This brought about the showing of video tapes of the riot outside, not only bringing it into the convention, but also breaking the police's ability to censor the video that some reporters were able to take, despite the police goal of beating journalists and breaking every kind of camera or recording device they could locate. The battle raged through different neighbourhoods and precincts of the city for the next two days, subsiding only at the end of the convention. Daley managed to issue the definitive statement on the battle: "the policeman isn't there to create disorder. He's there to preserve disorder."

Casualties from the battle filled Chicago's hospitals, though demonstrators tried to avoid them, knowing that police would wait there to arrest them if they could, or harass them if they couldn't. Many were taken to hospitals in other nearby towns and cities, preferably outside Cook County, and outside Illinois into Wisconsin if possible. Many were given first aid in makeshift retreats throughout the city. When they had free swinging room, the police went for head wounds; when the crowd made this difficult, thrusts at the eyes did well enough. In either situation, genitals were a prime target, and both head and genital wounds were commonly inflicted on those already knocked to the ground. Tear-gas, often shot from flame throwers, not only burned the eyes but attacked the whole system, causing intense burning in the throat and vomiting. Mace was directed at the eyes.

The televised footage of the battle showed the world what we already knew and had witnessed: that the war was not simply going on in Vietnam, it was going on in the heart of America. It was not waged only on blacks in Mississippi or in urban ghettos or university campuses, but on whole cities in the north. It swept through much of the country's second largest city, and could now happen anywhere. As in Vietnam, the demonstrators were outnumbered by the police, National Guard, and Regular Army troops in Chicago, and to put it mildly, the demonstrators were outgunned: the state's

forces carried arms ranging from brass knuckles, chains, and night sticks to rifles and machine-guns. A search of arrested and wounded demonstrators failed to produce a single firearm. The most powerful weapons found among them were wooden boards pulled out of park benches. Closed rank charges by National Guard troops with drawn bayonets proved the most effective weapons and tactics against demonstrators.

The battle polarised many, creating new sympathisers with both demonstrators and police. Among young people, it succeeded in recruiting considerably more anti-warriors than SDS anticipated. The federal government set up an investigation. Published as *The Walker Report*, it severely condemned Daley and the police, calling the battle "a police riot." The battle added considerably to the confusion of blue collar workers, ultimately to the strong detriment of the demonstrators. Polls of organised labour showed that the majority opposed the war, but also opposed the demonstrators. Jingoists borrowed tactics and held counter-demonstrations. Animosity toward the counter-culture, already strong enough in many areas, intensified considerably after the battle. The fight unlocked floodgates of funding and support for police, FBI, and other law enforcement agencies, encouraging greater surveillance, massive infiltration of counter-culture organisations, and giving the courts greater latitude in sentencing, even on charges that were flagrantly bogus. For the most part, middle America had not been able to distinguish the different counterculture strains. At the Battle of Chicago, it seemed to the mainstream that they presented a unified army, ready to tear the country apart, with or without an alliance with African America. All authorities had declared war on the Black Panthers before this battle, but intensified it afterward. The war on the Panthers included individual executions and massive fire-fights, though we should distinguish this war from the rest of the Movement, since the Panthers were heavily armed and rigorously trained as soldiers.

An odd complex of conspiracy charges brought the trial of 'The Chicago Eight' (David Dellinger, Tom Hayden, and Rennie Davis of SDS; Yippies Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin; student Lee Weiner, professor John Froines, and Black Panther Chairman Bobby Seale). The trial, presided over by judge Julius Hoffman, lasted several years, and instigated demonstrations outside the courthouse, some of which turned into riots, with the Chicago police acting as they had during the battle itself. Early in the trial, the judge ordered Seale bound and gagged to prevent him from talking back. In many ways,

a black man bound and gagged at his own trial seems emblematic of one of the major dimension of the period.

Counter-culture and anti-war struggles intensified at a dizzying rate after the battle. From this point on, revolution seemed inevitable to most people engaged in the political movements of the time.

### ***Inclusion / conclusion***

Perhaps one of the strangest aspects of the era was the large number of people who weren't so engaged. The US at the time consisted of worlds within worlds among galaxies that often passed through each other or moved farther apart. Looking back, the notion of revolution at that particular time in a country so wildly diverse as the US seems almost comic. We should have known better from our own experiences.

In the summer of '67, I had volunteered as a paramedic during the Seven Day War in the Middle East, but the war was over before I could have been put in place if anyone had accepted me, though I think the last thing anyone wanted was a bumbling American getting in their way. Ironically, I ended up taking care of some of the wounded from Chicago. Between the war in the Middle East and the Battle of Chicago, I was constantly moving through the many worlds of America without realising the breadth and resilience I found in people ranging from friends in a Digger commune to the straight-laced professors at school; in the drop-outs who floated past me in stoned-out crash pads to the filling station owner and his family in the cottage next to my family's; in the writers, artists, and musicians – activist or not – I met while travelling or at home to a girlfriend's mother and her friends who ran a catering service while preserving their status as '50s style housewives; in the factory workers of my hometown to the many, many fellow students who didn't think much about the war as long as they and their friends had deferments and had nothing to do with the counter-culture.

At the beginning of the summer of 1968, I was best man at the wedding of one of my cousins in Detroit. We spent several days before the wedding driving around aimlessly in a city whose traffic resembled that of a *Mad Max* movie, and existed as a separate world unto itself. The conservative, southern family of my cousin's bride treated me graciously even though I was an alien entity to them, which only revealed itself when one family member who had too much to drink challenged me to a fight if I objected to him voting for the ultra-conservative George Wallace, though I had said nothing about politics of any sort. If members of this family had been Chicago cops, they probably would have acted like those who really

were. But if they had been in the vicinity of the battle, I'm sure they would have joined me in helping with the wounded, even though they had no use for anything suggesting the counterculture. And if truth be spoken, if the Chicago cops had not been in uniform, a fair number of them would have done the same.

I have at times seen a paradox in the counter-culture's openness – this bore little resemblance to the elitism of the Beats, the hierarchies of the Trotskyites, and other exclusions in other precedents. On one hand, this set it apart and perhaps made it unique. On the other hand, it let in predators, people without commitments or abilities, and spies, and perhaps insured that events like the Battle of Chicago would fail. But perhaps, open and egalitarian as it was, it wasn't open enough ... At this point, there's no way of knowing.

**Sebastian Hayes**  
**Le Temps des Cerises:**  
**May '68 and Aftermaths**  
**Observations and Recollections**

Towards the end of May 1968 there were some ten millions of workers on strike in France and most of the important factories were occupied.<sup>1</sup> Notre-Dame-de-Paris flew the red flag. The Sorbonne, l'École des Beaux Arts, le Théâtre de l'Odéon, and countless other prestigious buildings were held by self-styled 'revolutionaries' who decided who was allowed in or not. At this time, moreover, uniformed police did not dare to enter any of the Faculties and other occupied buildings. One night rioting crowds attacked the Banque de France – which even the nineteenth century Paris Commune had not touched. A junior officer in a parachute regiment I subsequently met told me that he and his colleagues had been put on the alert and that he had even been asked whether he felt prepared to fire on the crowds in the streets of Paris.

However, the nation-wide movement dwindled away as unexpectedly as it had emerged, leaving very little trace. De Gaulle was returned massively in the 1968 election and it was several years before Mitterand and the Left came to power.

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May '68 was an entirely spontaneous movement. None of the big political parties had anything to do with it in the early stages. The PCF (French Communist Party) started off by pooh-poohing the whole thing but changed its tack once it was obvious that something was happening. The Students' Union was very energetic in calling for suspension of classes, but none of the industrial unions ever called for a general strike which was a grassroots affair and spread across the country like an epidemic.

The revolutionary organisations – I mean those who disdained to take part in elections – were themselves taken by surprise. The last ten years had been fairly placid ones in France, and the Marxist organisations had found themselves reduced to applauding China and Cuba and shouting about Yankee Imperialism. IS, the Situationist International, was just beginning to be known but only in intellectual and university milieu. At that time Guy Debord had

not yet published his remarkable book, *La Société du Spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*), and all the general public knew of the Situationists was a venomous tract published by the Strasbourg Students' Union entitled *La Misère en Milieu Etudiant* which one might rather freely render as 'The Nullity of the Student Milieu'. In fact, the American and English contingent of the IS, many of whom were known to me personally, was arguing that the 'revolution' was going to take place in the technologically and culturally more advanced Angle-Saxon countries. Debord took this seriously enough to make a belated attempt to learn English. At one of the early meetings of the Situationists during May '68 I remarked to someone there how surprised I was by what was happening in France and he replied, "Eh bien, nous aussi" ('So are we'). Certainly, the Situationists, or any other far left group, would have been utterly incapable of planning and directing a local, let alone a general strike.

Why did May '68 happen? Because the 'historical conditions' were favourable? Presumably they were, but no one spotted this until after the event.

A rolling stone can provoke an avalanche, but it does not follow that the avalanche was inevitable. Give or take a few months and there is no longer the slightest risk of a (social) landslide – ripeness is all. A.J.P. Taylor's view of history which gives a prominent role to chance is not so heretical as it once seemed: chaos theory has made us more familiar with processes where minute changes in the initial conditions can have disproportionately great consequences, the flutter of a butterfly's wing off Tokyo which can lead to a hurricane in Barbados.

Why France rather than somewhere else? With hindsight one can see reasons but at the time it seemed a most unlikely place for social upheaval. Californian Beats passing through Paris on their way to India found the French hopelessly square: Amsterdam was regarded as the 'hippest' city in Europe. France in 1968 was precociously poised between the old 'bourgeois' society with much sharper class divisions and a strong Marxist working-class tradition, and capitalism on the American model. The 'consumer society' had only just arrived. As it turned out, in the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries protest was to remain personal and cultural, whereas in France, and to a lesser extent in Italy, these influences fused with a still vigorous revolutionary tradition to produce an explosion. A year or so on and it would have been too late: apart from anything else the movement would have been drowned in a sea of LSD as happened in America.

The whole nation-wide strike started off with a banal incident. The right-wing organisation, Occident, called a demonstration near the Sorbonne, leftist students organised a counter-demonstration and there was a bit of a set-to. There were clashes with the police and leftist students were pursued by the police into the Sorbonne itself and some allegedly beaten up. (I was not in Paris at the time and arrived soon afterwards, but this is how it was described to me.)

It was claimed that the police had never before entered the Sorbonne, not even during the German Occupation – not en masse and in uniform anyway. There were protests, further demonstrations, further police action leading to yet more protests and so on.

This was the era of student demonstrations and during the previous year or so there had been a shock wave of student unrest going through the advanced countries. France had not been much affected: in some American campuses there had been much more serious scenes including some deaths even. On arriving in Paris that summer with my then 'partner' who will here be called Michèle, we, like pretty well all self-styled activists, started by looking down on the whole business as something that only concerned students. Actually, in the early stages the movement did limit itself to speaking of 'the independence of the university', and 'student rights' – hardly issues to get too worked up about, I felt.

Usually, this sort of thing reaches a mini-climax after a week or so and then dies down amid the indifference of the general population. But for some reason this storm in a college tea-cup blew up into a hurricane. Sections of the population outside the university began to get drawn in, liberal intellectuals on the one hand but also the so-called 'pègre' as the press insisted on calling them.

The 'pègre' ('riff-raff') comprised out-of-work French youths, the sort of people now called New Age travellers and so on. One night I found myself running through the streets arm-in-arm with an elderly clocharde ('down and out') who asked me whether I was a student. I said I was to avoid explanations, and she shouted above the hiss of tear-gas grenades "Vous avez mis le feu au poudre" ('You have put a match to the powder').

Student leaders spoke of the need to broaden the base of the movement; there was vague talk of 'overthrowing the system', bringing capitalism to an end. Demonstrators sung the 'Internationale', the song of the French Resistance, over and over and over again until they scattered as the hated CRS, the elite riot police, charged.

Very soon the universities ceased functioning. Most lecturers went on strike and if they didn't classes were disrupted; examinations

were postponed or cancelled. There was a certain amount of fighting with right-wing students, and some faculties changed hands more than once in the space of a morning. But the 'gauchistes' won everywhere. After their first disastrous foray into the university proper, uniformed police kept away. All sorts of people who were not students but 'part of the movement' moved in permanently, eating and sleeping in the Faculties. The main square of the Sorbonne was a mass of stalls where political groups dispensed their wares and argued interminably about how society was going to be re-organised once the bourgeois had been eliminated. A group of so-called 'Katangais', alleged ex-mercenaries, swaggered about the corridors of the Sorbonne, ready to take control of the revolutionary army as the country drifted towards civil war.

It is, of course, quite possible for a modern state to ignore the universities; close them down for months on end if necessary – this was done in Senegal the following year. The critical point came when, one historic night, a handful of young workers from the Renault factory at Billancourt came of their own accord to the Sorbonne and announced that they intended to unleash a wildcat strike. They were as good as their word, and almost immediately other important factories went on strike, following their lead. The CGT, the main trade union, never gave out a call for a general strike to my knowledge.

From the point of view of the authorities, it was the worst kind of nightmare: the state seemed to be going down like a pack of cards. The Sorbonne had a crude loud-speaker system set up overlooking the main square, and from a third-floor tiny room, the 'Comité pour le Soutien des Occupations' (Committee for the Maintenance of Occupations), a largely Situationist group, made sporadic announcements. One night a voice stated calmly, "Le Comité pour le Soutien des Occupations vient de décider l'occupation de toutes les usines de France" ('The Committee has just decided on the occupation of all the factories in France').

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During the first stages of a revolution or revolt, it appears to be invincible. Nothing succeeds like success. Paris started looking like a city under siege: vast heaps of rubbish accumulated at the end of streets (because the refuse collectors were on strike) and the carcasses of burned cars littered the main arteries after a night of barricades. Notre-Dame de Paris flew the red flag, as did most of the prestigious buildings in the centre of Paris. There was a proposal to



dye the Seine red, but in the end nothing came of it as we were unable to get hold of sufficient quantities of dye.

Offices still functioned but the staff couldn't have had a lot to do; the ORTF, the French State television, was for a while reduced to brief daily news bulletins. Theatres and cinemas were occupied; I have heard it said that the 'Folies Bergères' had the record for the longest strike: over three months. There were shortages of cooking oil and sugar but groceries and street markets functioned more or less normally, at least in Paris.

The Latin Quarter, harbouring the Sorbonne and other Faculties, was ideal for street fighting. It is a maze of alleyways and little streets many of which go back to the Middle Ages. Moreover, there was plenty of ammunition in the form of 'pavés' (paving blocks). The streets, even the broad Boulevard Saint-Michel, were not at the time covered with tarmac but were paved without mortar in the traditional fashion, the paving blocks rammed into place and holding by friction.

Pavé is often translated as 'cobble', but this gives the wrong impression. A pavé is a medium-sized near-cube made out of hard stone. One end is slightly tapered while the face that forms part of the roadway is rounded a little. A pavé is much heavier than a typical cobble and cannot be thrown with a wrist movement like a cricket ball: it has to be lobbed or bowled.

A typical scenario would be the following. A vast, noisy demonstration, singing, chanting and screaming slogans, marches up the Boulevard Saint-Michel while some distance away are serried ranks of police holding bucklers and firing off tear-gas grenades. (Someone rather aptly said that the CRS especially reminded him of the 'orcs' in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.) A single person near the head of the demonstration has a stave and with it he hammers the ground beneath his feet, trying to force a pavé into the sand beneath. (A well-known graffiti of the time was the haiku-like 'En-dessous des pavés ... la plage' – 'Underneath the paving-stones ... the beach'.)

Pushing in a pavé takes quite a long time and the demonstrators have to wait. Once you have pushed in or pulled out a single pavé it is, however, child's play to rip up the whole street since they are not cemented in.

The majority of demonstrations ended in terrified flight before CRS charges: serious fighting took place only at night and involved a small active minority of whom I was not personally one. Barricades were quite easy to make by setting fire to cars and putting them across the narrow streets. One could then add on dismantled public

toilets, advertising hoardings, bits of fencing and so on. The wilful destruction of motor cars probably did the movement more harm in the eyes of the general public than any other single act of the mini-revolution. There were sometimes, however, car-owners who accepted their fate, saying it was 'in a worthy cause'.

The crude or non-existent weapons of demonstrators rarely did much harm to the well-equipped and well-trained police. But, for all that, it must have been an unnerving experience for them: crowds, even unarmed, are frightening. Sometimes the wind changed direction and the tear-gas was taken backwards forcing the police to scatter – much to everyone's amusement.

Most of the fighting was throw-and-run, but Guy Debord and his band employed a better tactic, probably gleaned from some book on urban guerrilla. Instead of facing the police squarely and advancing and retiring rhythmically, Debord and his band moved off into a dark side-alley at right angles to the main street. Then, when the police charged, they bombarded them as they passed by – a far more efficient strategy since the police were taken by surprise and could not change direction to pursue their assailants.

May '68 was not just, or mainly, a carnival. At any moment one felt it might turn into something unimaginably hideous though one kept this thought at bay as much as possible. Quite early on a girl student was allegedly beaten-up and gang-raped by a group of CRS in a police van parked off the Boulevard Saint-Michel. She also had her hair shaved off – a particularly repulsive detail. I cannot of course vouch for the authenticity of this incident, but certainly we all believed it and all sorts of people of note signed the declaration affirming that this had taken place. (Those who printed the document were threatened with court proceedings.) It was also rumoured at the time that about seventeen people died in the street fighting – officially there was only one admitted death and that was not in the fighting itself.

Violence by itself says nothing about the revolutionary potential: very important social changes have, on occasion come about with very little fighting. And in Algeria during the last ten or so years over 36,000 people have been killed in the struggle between Islamic fundamentalists and the authorities, though very few people would view this as a revolutionary situation.

Nonetheless, it has to be said that without violence there would most likely have been no May '68. The French police are not much liked by the general public anyway, and the spectacle of unarmed students standing up to the CRS fired the imagination. It was

straight out of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* – and in fact one small, working-class boy who was always seen in the forefront of demonstrations was universally known as 'Gavroche' (one of the main characters). Also, if one can put it like this, the level of police brutality was 'just right': if you have no brutality at all people don't get so worked up, if you have too much everyone gets scared and keeps quiet.

Fighting in the streets did not go on every night: there were extended periods when there was nothing at all. But strange to relate people seemed to feel in advance what was coming.

I remember going into a small grocery store in the Latin Quarter towards the end of May. The shopkeeper was already putting up metal grilles and preparing to close early. "Ça va se bagarrer un peu partout cette nuit", his wife was explaining to a customer ('There's going to be fighting all over the place tonight').

This particular night was to all intents and purposes the same as the night before and the night before that. No appeal had been made, no particular event had taken place that I knew of. But, as it turned out, she was quite right. The night in question saw the most serious fighting of the whole month, barring the initial night of the barricades.

\* \* \*

May '68 started a movement without leaders and organisation, and this is more or less how it remained. The only three students who became at all known were Sauvageot, the President of the Students' Union; Alain Geismar, the leading Maoist; and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the most prominent of all.

Sauvageot made a lot of inflammatory speeches at demonstrations, but loud-speaking systems were pretty appalling in those days and I never managed to hear what he was saying. That didn't matter because we knew the substance anyway – 'Down with the police, freedom for the university, and an end to capitalism'. In the autumn Sauvageot was called up for National Service and disappeared from view.

Alain Geismar became more prominent later when his organisation were banned: he was eventually put in prison.

Cohn-Bendit was a sort of mascot of the movement, particularly when he got expelled from France – he was German – but slipped back through the net to reappear at the Sorbonne amidst wild acclamation. He first came to prominence prior to May '68 by making a rather ridiculous speech before the Minister of Education (or some such worthy) complaining about student sex life, or rather the lack of it – one fails to see what the government is supposed to

do about such matters. After May '68 he wrote quite a good account of the events and went back to Frankfurt to live in a commune.

Figures from the older generation(s) were ignored no matter what their track record. We were not interested in hearing about The French Resistance or the Spanish Civil War. I remember seeing Jean-Paul Sartre booed and hissed, the students chanting, "Merci, papa". Famous persons on the Left such as Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir subsequently financed gauchiste journals and gave a certain protection to the movement in the style of Bertrand Russell with CND. In return for this they were treated with contempt by students and dismissed as 'bourgeois'. I found this rather painful to witness.

With time, the PCF and the massive union it controlled, the CGT, managed to re-assert their authority over the working-classes. Their aims were unashamedly reformist: wage increases, return to work and eventual victory in elections. We saw this as a shameful sell-out at the time; however, having seen what has happened to a country like the Lebanon, I can with hindsight understand their reluctance to let the country drift towards civil war.

Leaderless, the May movement was very largely idea-less as well at the beginning. Scarcely anyone had any sort of clue as to what sort of society they wanted, though everyone was agreed they didn't want the present one. There was vague talk of 'a truly socialist government' – whatever that meant.

This lack of a political agenda proved to be a strength rather than a weakness. If you define your aims too clearly in advance, you may find that you actually achieve them – in which case you have nothing else to do but shut up. But since the May movement had no specific programme, it was limitless and so could aim at overthrowing the entire social order.

I do not mean that May '68 was all action and no theory: on the contrary it was obsessively verbal, particularly since the French are good speakers. It was all like a re-play of the Assemblée Nationale in 1789, or the Convention. There were literally endless discussions, speeches and Assemblies which went on all night and took place in beautiful surroundings such as the lecture halls of the Sorbonne or the Théâtre de l'Odéon. You might see someone pulling aside the red velvet curtains of a box to discourse on the struggle of construction workers for better working conditions.

But the theory of the revolution was discovered in the thick of action, it did not in general precede action. People learned more about the Russian Revolution (of 1917) or the Spanish Civil War by living through May '68 than by taking a two year course: revolutions

tend to resemble each other and one could almost draw a basic diagram and fill in the names as appropriate.

Fortunately, France had one or two acute social analysts, in particular Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem. Situationist terms and slogans suddenly got nation-wide diffusion since they appeared in endless tracts, including ones distributed at factories, and were sprayed onto the walls of buildings. Typical slogans were:

'Defense d'Interdire' ('It is forbidden to forbid'). This usually appeared below the official painted phrase 'Il est interdit de ...'

'Ce que nous voulons – tout' ('What do we want? Everything!')

'La revolution sera une fête, ou ne sera pas' ('The revolution will be a carnival, or will not take place at all')

'Vivre sans temps mort et jouir sans entraves' (untranslatable, perhaps 'live at a perpetual crescendo and enjoy yourself without limit').

More serious, practical advice and exhortation was not lacking. The 'Comité pour le Soutien des Occupations' ceaselessly urged the strikers to maintain occupation of the factories and to pass on to the next stage of the revolutionary process, 'la Grève Active' (Active Strike) when production would recommence with Workers' Councils in control. May '68 failed essentially because de Gaulle managed to persuade the French people that what they needed was not self-management and workers' control but a General Election.

May '68 demonstrated the crucial importance of communication systems – a classic Situationist thesis – though the systems available were crude compared to what exist today. Computers and word processors had not even been invented, and most propaganda was printed on Gestetner Roneo machines. *Actuel*, a journal produced entirely by unpaid militants and to which famous cartoonists and authors contributed appeared *daily* during May and June 1968. Announcements made on loud-speaker systems in the Sorbonne were from time to time relayed to the nation via news reports. French state television, ORTF, was never taken over, but was reduced to brief daily news bulletins for a while. Slogans sprayed on buildings remained for months and got diffused by way of photographs. (Wall-newspapers were extremely important in the Chinese Cultural Revolution.)

Power, inasmuch as it existed within the Faculties and other occupied buildings, lay with those who held the loudspeaker system and the telephone. At Censier, the Faculty I frequented most, a so-

called 'Co-ordination Committee' early on installed itself behind the switchboard. At the time no one was much interested; people didn't fancy spending the heady days of May stuck behind a desk answering calls. However, after a few days, other groups realised with horror that the insignificant 'Co-ordination Committee' was more or less in control of the whole scene since all calls out and in went through them: they controlled the flow of information and on a world-wide level since they didn't have to bother about footing the telephone bill.

\* \* \*

Were there any individuals or groups who attempted to get control of the movement? As far as I know, there were not. Mitterand, not at the time a very popular figure, apparently made some overtures with a view to getting support, or at least neutrality, in the forthcoming elections. But his appeals were rejected with indignation. The PCF which at the time commanded 25% of the vote was just able to check, but not to absorb, the May movement and 1968 marked the beginning of its decline. The more active factory workers switched their allegiance to Maoism: this was the period of violent exchanges between Chinese and Soviet leaders and the feeble PCF was dismissed as 'revisionist' as the jargon went.

I did, however, witness with my own eyes a local take-over in one of the Faculties, and the story is instructive.

During May/June the Parisian Faculties had ceased to be centres of learning: large numbers of people milled about in them, slept there, lived there. Censier had a makeshift infirmary, a print-room which turned out enormous quantities of tracts, even a restaurant of sorts with the cooking done by volunteers – it cost one franc a meal and some of the raw materials came directly from farms in Brittany.

The already mentioned 'Co-ordination Committee' soon emerged as the supreme power in Censier but, after about a fortnight or so, they all nobly resigned to leave the place to other people. A selective General Assembly met on a daily basis: individual Committees sent their representatives, no more than two per committee. I and an English friend attended as representatives of the Committee for Foreigners. Sessions were pretty stormy and one man of about 35, supposedly a writer, showed up well and commanded general respect. When it came to electing a President he was proposed and easily elected along with his clique – though only for a trial period of 24 hours. He and his band now controlled the switchboard amongst other things. During these 24 hours the new Committee announced

that it had extended its period of tenure by another day, then for a whole week, and eventually for the rest of the months.

The President and his henchmen dominated the Assembly and at one amazing session, recalling Moscow in the '30s, he announced a series of measures which in effect brought all committees under his personal control. He instituted censorship of all tracts printed – on the pretext that one could not allow 'reactionary literature' to be disseminated. He closed down the restaurant, which was the power base of the 'pègre' element – officially enrolled students did not need to eat there as they could go to the university restaurants which were still functioning. He even said that the infirmary ought to be closed, I and my friend stood there in amazement while one measure after another was tabled giving this man and his cronies unlimited power. Some of us tried to oppose him but without success.

It should be noted that the original, and exemplary, Co-ordination Committee was unelected, whilst the eventual despot obtained his position democratically. Also, prior to becoming President, he seemed likeable and inspired confidence.

As it happened, he did not enjoy power for very long as the police retook the faculty not long afterwards. Before they did there was a rather amusing incident. The pègre refused to allow the restaurant to be closed and, in retaliation against the 'intellectuals', they got hold of as many tracts as they could and hurled them out of the windows. The lawns below were littered with mountains of soggy tracts.

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Various people to whom I have spoken about May '68 seem to assume that all sorts of wild sexual scenes went on in the Sorbonne, and even in the nearby streets and parks. When I tell them that I never saw or heard of any, they are incredulous, even indignant. Now I come to think of it, I cannot remember having seen a single person stoned or even drunk, though doubtless there were one or two.

Why was this? The main reason was that just living from day to day was itself a permanent high, interspersed with frightening downs. With a modern state apparently collapsing like a house of cards around one, there was no need for stimulants. One bathed in a general atmosphere of camaraderie that made sex redundant or impossible: though doubtless some people did sleep together May/June '68 was more conducive to deep romantic attachments amongst comrades than to instant sexual contact. Paris 1968 was not San Francisco.

There are two factors in such a situation. On the one hand such an extreme situation is likely to make people not bother twopence

about all sorts of social conventions, which suddenly seem fatuous. But on the other hand conditions were not exactly favourable to nudism and love-ins. During most of the period we expected an imminent military or police crack-down: the atmosphere was exalted but rather tense to say the least. Disruption of normal habits, irregular and insufficient meals, lack of sleep, the emotional strain, all this was hardly conducive to sexual performance. The girlfriend of a very active member of the 'Comité pour le Soutien des Occupations' confided pitifully to Michèle that Jean-Pierre had actually stopped making love to her! Michèle sensibly told her that this was only to be expected.

Moreover, the French student left was not at the time very 'liberated' by English and American standards. Trotskyites and Marxists gave the impression that they considered sex, or at any rate sexual pleasure, as 'bourgeois' in the time-honoured Communist tradition. Anarchists and Situationists did talk quite a lot about sex but strictly in macho terms which equated (male) sexual performance with revolutionary vigour. Even at the time I found several of their cartoons and posters repulsive.

Women, although they took a large part in demonstrations and even in some of the fighting, scarcely existed as such during May '68, and no woman became a leading figure. I never even saw a woman as Chairperson of a single Assembly. The French Women's Lib, if it existed at all at the time, must have kept pretty quiet. The Gay Liberation Front, which blossomed some two or three years later, claimed that leftists in the Sorbonne had ripped down their posters during May '68. Women's Liberation, likewise the ecological movement, are definitely late twentieth century phenomena and the Left in France, at the beginning, viewed both with disapproval. Even Debord tried to write off Gay and Women's Liberation, dismissing both as 'tentatives de libération parcellaire' ('attempts at partial liberation').

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How did one live – I mean eat, sleep and so on – during May and June '68 in Paris? Students still had their grants and could eat at the very cheap university restaurants. Other people lived off savings if they had any. You could sleep in the university buildings: some even had beds and individual rooms such as Nanterre, and there were plenty free once the right-wing boarders had cleared off. If you had no money at all, the movement would more or less keep you going. No one bothered about the future and happily threw up or endangered



their jobs and prospects. After demonstrations and meetings there were collections to which people gave generously. I don't think anyone made any money out of May '68.

There was a lot of chanting and singing but, surprisingly, May '68 did not produce a crop of popular songs. We had to make do with those of another era, mainly the French Resistance song, *Ohe, partisan, ouvrier et paysan*, or even *L'Internationale*.

What did people spend the day doing? Outside demonstrations, picketing and street fighting most of the time was spent talking, arguing about the future society and drafting endless tracts. For hand-written posters we used butchers' wrapping paper which was extremely cheap. The Faculté des Beaux-Arts produced some highly professional and well-designed revolutionary posters. The year 1968 must have seen record sales for spray-paint guns and felt-tipped markers.

All this may seem rather unappealing. What changed everything was the extraordinary atmosphere of general euphoria and fraternity, something that is hardly to be found otherwise except possibly by all-night dancing combined with certain drugs like Ecstasy.

★ ★ ★

May '68 came to an end because the unions accepted the offered 10% all-round wage increase, and de Gaulle managed to get people to the polling booths. Radical students and workers denounced this as a diversion, to cries of 'Elections, Trahison' ('Elections, Treason'), but the political parties, including the PCF, thought (mistakenly) that they might get a majority.

There were other, more mundane reasons. Although the general strike ended after three weeks, certain factories such as Renault Flins held out much longer and the faculties only fell in late June or July. But then came the holidays. By the time people had returned from the Spanish beaches the momentum had been lost irretrievably. I remember an old woman in a Parisian suburb saying contemptuously, "Hier, c'était les barricades, et aujourd'hui, c'est le tennis" ('Yesterday it was barricades, and today it's playing tennis'). Those of us who couldn't afford to go on holiday mooched around disconsolately watching the army and temporary workers cleaning up the faculties and laying tarmac on the previously paved streets. There was wishful talk of a 'Red Autumn' which never came. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

★ ★ ★

Were there any bad sides to the May 'revolution'? Unfortunately, yes. An extreme situation of this kind is not conducive to tolerance:

the revolutionary, like the reactionary, mind functions in black and white, in bold contrasts. They who are not with us are against us. The mass mind is of necessity simplistic: 'Us, Workers, Socialism = Good; Them, police, bourgeois, the Right = Evil'. Truth is not of primary importance: what matters is that words and ideas should lead to action. In a number of situations and incidents, one could see the Red Guard and the Cultural Revolution not so far away.

One evening quite early on, leftists occupied the Théâtre de l'Odéon, apparently on the express invitation of the Director. He was, however, for his pains given a thorough mauling by the crowd who took the view that he had, over the years, been 'peddling bourgeois ideology'. Someone asked him what he had done 'for the revolution'. He answered that he had fought in the Spanish Civil War. This rather shut us up. Later on, rather ridiculous tracts talking about the 'consumption of bourgeois ideology in theatres and concert-halls' were distributed to ordinary people in the street such as bus-drivers.

It is very easy to drift into fanaticism in such a situation. Although things didn't get to that pitch, I don't find it at all surprising that on both sides during the Spanish Civil War certain prisoners were summarily executed. One does not have the time or energy to give someone a full trial, and if he's a fascist (or alternatively a Red) that proves he's a bastard so what does it matter anyway?

After May '68 one didn't on the whole frequent people of a different persuasion, since they were 'for the police'. Some two or three years later, a regional leader of the Maoist 'Gauche Proletarienne' was denounced by local members for having an affair with 'a Fascist girl' – and by Fascist one should probably understand simply someone who wasn't a Leftist. Nicholas, as he was called, was ordered by the national executive to terminate this relation. Francis, a friend of mine who told me the story, said the last time he saw Nicholas he was bent over the table in a cafe weeping, unable to come to terms with an impossible situation.

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What were the overall consequences of May '68?

Not a lot, I would say, on a national level. The 10% wage increase was whittled away by a devaluation of the franc that winter. It was to be some years before Mitterand and the Socialists came to power, and conceivably May '68 may have delayed rather than accelerated their victory.

On a personal level, however, May '68 was pretty catastrophic, especially for the younger generation. Activists in the factories were

weeded out once things had quietened down a bit, and those who remained found themselves in a very uncomfortable position – not only because of the police but because of the Communists. The PCF saw 'gauchistes' as the main obstacle to their electoral success, and there was probably more fighting between Maoists and Communists than there was between leftists and right-wing Organisations.

May '68 just ante-dated the massive arrival of pop music, drugs, long hair, Eastern mysticism, feminism and so on from California and swinging London. All this combined with revolutionary fervour produced a heady cocktail. The result was a vast drop-out movement from the lycées, universities and factories. It seemed meaningless after May '68 to spend one's whole life passing exams, holding down a job, getting married, taking out a mortgage and so on. Since the Red Revolution didn't, after all, seem to be round the corner, large numbers of French boys and girls set out on the Khatmandu trail or tried to start rural communes – I was myself actively involved in this movement. France has a lot of uninhabited land and it was at the time easy to rent, or even buy, derelict farms and sometimes whole villages for absurd prices. Most of these attempts were a miserable fiasco for various reasons, lack of manual skills and training, nostalgia for the urban centres, hostility of the local population, problems with drugs (whether to allow them or not), and a general lack of minimal organisation within the communes.

During May itself groups pulled together to form an unofficial 'Popular Front', but once momentum was lost they started bickering in earnest. Eventually the most active and audacious organisation carried the day and this in France was the Maoist 'Gauche Proletarienne'. Its leaders went to prison and staged hunger strikes, its militants in the universities were ordered to leave their studies and go to work in factories which many of them did. The Maoists were in effect latter-day Bolsheviks: they had the dedication and vigour but also the blinkered views and pedantry of traditional Marxists.

Anarchists didn't so much fancy spending the rest of their days at the assembly line waiting for a chance to lead a strike, and many of them took their chances in the rural communes instead. The Situationists broke up into warring coteries soon after May '68 and the whole movement seems to have been reduced to Guy Debord and an Italian some five years later. Guy Debord is now dead, having allegedly committed suicide in his country house in the Auvergne two years ago. He had become an alcoholic in his latter years.

Many ex-militants turned to drugs or petty crime after the collapse of their hopes, or led a precarious existence on the borders of society

doing odd jobs. In many ways student drop-outs fared worse than working class people, since, once they had burned their boats, they found they had no trade to fall back on and were regarded with suspicion by actual working-class people. Yet others re-entered the system and prospered – usually with a nagging guilty conscience all the same.

The trouble with an experience like May '68 is that, having lived a kind of dream life for a while, one finds it almost impossible to re-adjust to normality. Chamfort, an eighteenth century author of aphorisms and anecdotes, says that someone who has lived through a 'grande passion' spends the rest of his life simultaneously regretting the experience had ended and wishing it had never happened. This just about sums my feelings about the whole era. Life is never the same again.

#### **Footnote**

1. The only notable exception was EDF, l'Electricité de France, which did not take part in the strike for 'humanitarian reasons'.

## *A-infos*

### **1995: Chronique d'un mouvement**

#### **1: THINK**

#### ***Misery ... it's always the poor you attack the most***

For more than twenty years the various austerity programmes have continued. From that of the socialists in 1983 to that of Juppé they all have in common the aim of building a liberal Europe (Maastricht Treaty) which imposes the need for squeezing public expenditure (reducing the budget deficit). This anti-social Europe is being built to make the old continent a competitive economic pole in the world market. The aim is to bring down the cost of labour by giving free reign to business interests but not workers (paying off public debt). This is why the state is making political decisions as to which budgets to cut: education, health, ASSEDIC, social security ... whilst leaving alone, of course, armaments and the political gravy train (6% rise).

Must we continue to submit our health, education and the rest of our living conditions to the laws of competition? The globalisation of the market economy is synonymous with insecurity and poverty in the countries of the North and intense misery in those to the South. Everywhere we can see the installation of a real social apartheid between rich and poor regions, prosperous urban centres and the rotting suburbs, health for the rich and minimal security for the rest, schools and universities abandoned and starved of funds. This divided development depends on people being willing to take it.

It's well known: the thinner the carrot the bigger the stick. In order to maintain this unequal social order the state announces repressive measures: community policing since 1981, neighbourhood watch, a new penal code, increased police powers, video surveillance, repression of social movements, Schengen agreements, etc. Scapegoats must be found. Today France is an openly racist country with racist laws. Finally there is the principle of divide and rule: oppose the French to the foreigners, the workers and the unemployed, the haves and the have nots, women and men.

The pillage and exploitation of the countries to the East as well as the South is tearing apart social structures and on top of capitalist barbarity we have religious and nationalist obscurantism.

Our revolt against the logic of liberalism manifests itself by a refusal

of all authoritarian systems and a call for solidarity between individuals and nations based on free exchange. We desire a share of wealth rather than simply misery. With or without work we must acquire the means to live with dignity. When we think of the profits linked to financial speculation and also the fiscal fraud linked to it which, in France, every year, is equal to the budgetary deficit (230 billion francs) we no longer want them to speak to us of sacrifice.

***Their reserves aren't big enough ... for the depths of our desire***

Throughout France students are mobilising ...

All around us: 3.5 million unemployed, a growing mass of workers whose jobs are on the line across the planet, the growing impoverishment of whole continents whilst the wealth of the world never ceases to grow.

Here, even in Perpignan, there are loads of us who live in shit, unemployment, on a minimum income, grabbing a free ride on the transport and tax system, often not knowing where to sleep and what to eat.

Are our actions apolitical? Ridiculous question! It's unbelievable ... as if the wish to jeopardise the whole of society wasn't a political decision aimed at providing a compliant and obedient workforce on demand. We are opposed to this set-up however naive we may be! Clearly, we haven't understood anything! Paying people as little as possible is the only way to be competitive within a neo-liberal framework and to oppose restraints is to oppose the logic of the market. In other words our action is as political as that which would take the taxpayers' money to spend in Mururoa instead of investing it in education.

All around us despite the false pretences of the media the flood of repression and exclusion is growing. Our future is being pawned, the present brings its own impoverishments. There is the right to be laid off, the right to despair or anger, there is the humiliation of immigrant workers, there are the expulsions and the extraditions, there is the return to moral, sexist and religious order, there is selection in our universities and the employment exchanges, there is the teachers crisis, there is the restructuring of the social security system. There is nothing but the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Then there's the police and wage slavery which beckons. There's the take-over of education by the bosses and Pasqua's schemes paid for out of public funds and there is racism.

20% of the population own 68% of its wealth whilst 60% make do with 12%. We face the end of education for pleasure, we face Chernobyl

and the hole in the ozone, we face work which crushes us and unemployment which kills, we face a growth in public begging, now forbidden, as it was in Perpignan this summer, we face the fall of the APL, we face the right which attacks and the left which lies, the unions in a state of crisis, we face a miserable income and an income of misery, overcrowded prisons, housing crises, boredom, a dead end future. We have had enough!

***Students on strike: 'We are a social movement not a student movement'***

Nantes, as we know, was proud and terrible in March 1994. The collective actions of libertarian groups, Virus Mutinerie and SCALP, had allowed for the emergence in the heart of the student population and further afield a new practice and a new theory. New questions were being raised: what are the aims of education (should they be profitable?), an end to the primacy of work, the sharing of wealth, North-South global relations, racist laws, etc.

*The struggle in Nantes today* – It has its own characteristics which were evident two years ago and also others new or more strongly asserted. It also shows certain defects old and new.

As in March 1994, the struggle which is taking place on campus affirms its autonomy (UNEF-ID is dead, UNEF is divided), its plurality (free and accepted political expression for groups and individuals), and its direct democracy (sovereign General Assembly, absence of hierarchy and delegation). It is also characterised by its openness to all (be they students, unemployed, workers or the excluded), its violence, its parties; by its motions that have been passed and in the way it functions the Nantes movement shows itself to be anti-capitalist, social – 'we are a social movement, not a student movement' (1st December 1995) – anti-hierarchical. What is more recent is its really needed solidarity (and its organisation) alongside the struggling workers, in particular the workers of the SNCF: jointly organised demonstrations, concerted action to get money for the strike funds.

By being aware of its own self identity the movement has considered full self management for the university and has proposed a change in the curriculum (permanent critique of knowledge and not simply its consumption), its form (end of the paternalistic relation between students and teaching staff) by putting an end to class divisions – opening the university to one and all, ending the 'slavery' of the IATOSS personnel. This has not been tried but it will

be soon. That's a promise. But also there are various faults which are becoming apparent. By putting in place a structure which tries to exclude by means of manipulation or political backlashes, the movement sometimes gets bogged down in practical formalities which limit initiative. The worst defect of the movement, but one which must also be considered its greatest success, is its high degree of politicisation. By becoming aware of the global nature of things, of their difficulties and by wishing to confront them head on the movement has discovered that it has no real critical and liberating thought.

If critical elements exist, they are still weak and insufficient. That is why many feel they have grasped the nettle but don't know by which end to hold it. In order to solve the problem a day was dedicated to Marx and the setting up of a liberation movement. 300 people took part and the outcome was a belief in the necessity to dispense with hierarchical, mass and authoritarian organisations (such as PC, LCR, PO, LO).

Also it is necessary to reread various revolutionary ideologies – marxism, anarchism, dadaism, situationalism. In Nantes the movement is not yet revolutionary but in a state of revolution.

## **2:ACT**

### ***A night of demonstrating at the university of Jussieu sets the student delegates running***

On the devastated forecourt of Jussieu, where a few fires are burning, the lights from the campus university pierces the night at the foot of tower 43. Broken open by metal bars a little after 10pm, the bookshop is witness to a continuous procession of 'customers' who leave, loaded down with plastic bags on which you can read 'Les Librairies du SAVOIR'. Inside books are strewn over the floor. 'Help yourself!' shouts a big type, who is destroying the computer data behind the counter. Amidst the sound of broken glass, and the frantic activities of the demonstrators, students are doing their shopping. Two worlds meet without recognising each other. Dressed in a pullover and a duffel coat one young man asks his neighbour, who is filling a bag with stationery, where the chemistry papers are. From the mouth of a student of Art History the words pour out, 'It's crazy what they are doing, you can't approve but at the same time it's too late, best take advantage of the situation. I can never buy myself any books, the feeling of power at being able to help yourself without paying ... it's unbelievably exciting'.



This was the scene on November 21st – the end of a demonstration marked by incidents threatening to start again throughout the night with ten times the violence. Shortly before 7pm, Thursday, there were incidents around the university of Jussieu. Three cars were overturned by groups of young people. A fistful of molotov cocktails were thrown at the riot police at Place Jussieu. Behind the university gates was set up a type of barricade with tables, chairs, rubbish bins.

'If the riot cops come into the uni there will be big trouble', a small well-organised group wearing sweatshirts with white hoods, began to sack the campus. Smashed up with sledgehammers, the concrete of the forecourt was transformed into projectiles which came raining down on the roofs of the cars parked outside.

'We are hungry', shouted voices from the cafeteria at the entrance to the university. 'Can't we get the keys?' asked one student. At about 7.45 the cafeteria's windows were smashed in with metal bars. A crowd of demonstrators and students piled inside. Drink and food vending machines were quickly destroyed and their contents consumed. 'There's enough for everyone'. The hungry got behind the fast food counter and set up an improvised restaurant service.

Meanwhile in amphitheatre 44, the national co-ordinating body was having a meeting. Militants from UNF and UNEF-ID were in attendance but also many grassroots delegates who had come in from outside the city elected by general assemblies. At the entrance to the amphitheatre a roll call was made of the various towns one by one. Sandwiches are eaten and folk warm up to the idea of the '4 billion franc reserve fund' of the university presidents. Some expressed their concerns quickly blaming the anarchists alone for the disorder some meters away. Members of the CNT (National Confederation of Labour), dressed in black leather, with scarves and flags under their arms deny it.

*General Assembly deferred* – The tension was mounting with constant attempts to gain entry from the very excited young people. Well organised they fell back and came on again and again. When finally most of the delegates from Paris and other cities had got in those on the doors gave up under the pressure. It was chaotic. The group which could have formed the co-ordinating committee made off to the Arab World Institute. The General Assembly was finally adjourned until 8.30 the following morning to take place at Censier. In amphitheatre 45 a wild General Assembly took place infiltrated by some of the go-to-the-limits militants of Paris 8 Saint Denis along with a postal worker calling for a general strike and some railway

workers. Drinks and food from dispensers, half consumed, were strewn everywhere. Standing on a table someone was waving a huge black flag with a red star. One young person was clutching bags from the bookshop whilst being pushed by one of his friends, 'Drop it you'll get done as you go out ... the riot cops are everywhere'. Bags fall to the ground. 'We've got to have a discussion', shouted someone who nobody was listening to. A vote was taken in complete disorder on a motion from Saint Denis saying, 'no to the false negotiators'. Free public transport, reduction in working hours, an end to the nuclear programme, a general and unlimited strike – all was demanded ... in chaotic scenes. Suddenly the lights were turned off – by whom wasn't clear. The 'votes' unable to be taken by a show of hands took place on sound volume but darkness soon discouraged these last combatants.

### ***Testimony regarding police intervention and judicial repression***

After the student demo of 21st November, seven students known as 'rioting demonstrators' were arrested, and judged at Paris' 23rd Correctional Chamber, that same evening between 8.30pm and 1.30am. Six of them are contesting the evidence brought against them and the police statements claiming they contain numerous contradictions. Today we must demand the release of these students condemned 'as an example' and with no real evidence. Vincent, a student at Paris VII – Jussieu, who was one of the condemned demonstrators tells us about that particular evening.

### ***How were you arrested?***

Vincent: At the end of the demo there was some rioting on the Boulevard St Michel near the shop known as the Vieux Campeur. Five or six policemen in civilian clothes had taken refuge in the shop because some of the 'rioters' were attacking them. I was there, and I saw what happened: there were some 'rioters', true, but mainly just demonstrators. Firstly the cops carried out a preliminary charge, taking some demonstrators into the Vieux Campeur. Then they charged a second time. At that moment I turned my back on them, someone shouted a warning and I began to run. I was knocked down twice, I got up but the third time a cop stopped me by twisting my arm. I had such bad bruising that a doctor told me not to work for twelve days. The cop handcuffed me and took me back into the shop; he pushed me to the ground and covered my face with my jacket saying, 'I don't want to look at your mug'. He kicked me in

the stomach, the other demonstrators received the same treatment.

Once in the black maria he gave me a kick in the face. At the 13th arrondissement police station there wasn't much violence apart from one truncheoning. However in that police station I saw GUD stickers on the typewriters and 'Present' on the tables ... then we were taken to the police depot and transferred in security vans to the court.

### *What happened during the trial?*

Vincent: Seven of us were charged with 'rioting'; more precisely I was accused of smashing a car window, attempting to steal a duvet from it and rebellion: I deny everything, except rebellion (even in their way of using the word). One cop also says he saw a box of fountain pens fall out of my pocket during my arrest: I am therefore asking for fingerprint tests given that I have never touched them. I am accused of rebellion which is to say I kneeed, kicked and punched them and insulted them even though there were three of them. The prosecution described me as a very dangerous individual who had nothing to do with the students demands and who simply came along to riot. The court was very harsh with every one and I was given a prison sentence.

In fact the trial was a farce, based simply on police evidence. The police went to see the shop owner who had been looted, Duriez, and he gave an exact description of me; however, later on in the trial, he said, 'I wasn't there so I can't describe any of the rioters'. A journalist from the newspaper *Liberation* was also told by one of the shop assistants that she couldn't identify any of the rioters and couldn't describe me.

There were other unbelievable cases: one student from Paris VIII, who was trying to stop the riot and climbed onto a car calling on people to stop, was given a five month suspended sentence for stealing newspapers. Or the student who was accused of hitting a police officer with a board and was arrested one and a half hours after the event because he had paint on his shoes.

I will therefore file a formal complaint for injuries and false evidence. On Wednesday I will give an explanation to the General Assembly and I believe I will receive the support of the students. In fact I don't understand what has happened to me: I was simply watching and suddenly found myself defenceless at the police station.

### *The thinner the carrot the bigger the stick*

On Tuesday 5th December several hundred people (500 to 800) confronted the forces of law and order.

The confrontations began with some stone throwing (successful!) smashing the windows of the police station. This was followed by some molotov cocktails thrown against the walls. The events started at around 4pm whilst the trade union demo had ended at around 1pm. The confrontations lasted until 11pm

The police used strong tear-gas from the beginning along with disbursal grenades. An enormous and terrifying police deployment plunged the town centre into a *de facto* curfew: shops and bars closed, empty roads with police checkpoints.

All public transport was stopped. According to the press there were twenty-one police injured but none of the demonstrators were hurt. There were four arrests for confrontations and seven for looting. These figures do not seem credible given the fleet of ambulances going from the hospital to the university.

Moreover, plain clothes police gave chase by car. Members of the National Front and Student Renewal could be found behind the riot police lines and at the beginning of the confrontation were making propaganda among the demonstrators.

Many people who tried to intervene during the strong-arm arrests were insulted and even charged with obstruction by the police.

*Bits and Pieces* – The riot police were seen to be relieving passers-by (young people) of their scarves, hats and jackets before ordering them to disburse. Those who stayed behind were carted off.

Young girls and other evening strollers were truncheoned along the security perimeter set up by the police. A creche that was in the vicinity was filled with tear-gas, the parents who protested were threatened and insulted.

There were numerous provocations and manipulations by civilian police trying to push the demonstrators into going 'too far'.

Polititise your worries and worry the politicians.

***If you move, if we move together then ... all is possible***

The social confrontation is spreading like wildfire! The 'Juppé Plan' is the last straw which will break the camel's back. After the students, the railway workers, the RATP workers and the postal workers come the medical workers, Air France and Air Inter workers, lorry drivers, teachers and many others ... they all come to dance.

By wanting to submit social security and pensions to the laws of profit, under the pretext of needed 'reforms', the government is not only attacking 'sectional interests', it is calling into question fundamental social rights which concern us all... that is to say the

growth of social inequalities at every level.

Today the 'Juppé Plan' is simply the perfection of a generalised process of rendering our existential conditions ever more insecure: an attack on salaries (rise in VAT, new social security contributions, wage freezes, higher taxes on income, reductions in unemployment benefit) the development of forms of underpaid underemployment (after school and community work it's 'business'), sectoral reconstruction plans (sackings, mobility, flexibility, relocalisation), growth in inequality of access to public services (rise in the cost of using the RATP, the closure of maternal and junior protection centres, rise in medical costs, etc.).

Some would have us believe that this is a revolt of the 'well off'. Good joke. The workers in the public sector are being reproached for not accepting that which has been imposed of the private sector: the lengthening of the number of years of pension contributions from thirty-seven-and-a-half to forty years, the degradation of working conditions, the loss of jobs, reduced workforces and fiscal raids on income. Simply not to go under becomes a 'privilege'.

On the contrary, the strikers of these last few weeks have opened a breach in the consensus of passivity and resignation. Beyond the evident need to squash the 'Juppé Plan', and those problems specific at every level, the demands which are coming to light today in the movement go well beyond those 'categories' into which they would place us: they express a need to defend not only what we have won but also to grab back a minimum quality of life.

- The right to a guaranteed income, in particular for the unemployed and those in unstable positions.
- A huge reduction in working hours so we can all work ... less, differently.
- Effective equality of access to social services such as health.
- The repeal of repressive and racist laws and regulations such as the infamous 'Pasqua Laws'.

At the grass roots it is not only support for the strikers which is necessary, but also our participation in the general movement: we are neither 'spectators' nor simple 'users' but workers (public and private), the insecure, the unemployed, students, school attendees; some are on strike, some aren't but we have the same problems, we are all in the same boat, we are victims of the same social regression.

Do the laws of economics condemn us? Let's burn the statute book! To struggle, to achieve dialogue, to imagine and build other ways of

living together it is, now more than ever, the time for our rage, our anger, our needs and our desires so that this generalised dissatisfaction should become a movement of generalised social confrontation, so that Chirac and Juppé should step aside and that we grab the maximum.

Our arms are occupation, requisition, expropriation, direct democracy, autonomy, resistance, general strike.

Our goals are equality, justice, solidarity, mutual aid and freedom.

### **3: THE SPECTACLE**

#### ***TF1: The bosses' voice***

France's TV channel TF1 has specialised in the art of setting workers against workers. One excellent example: the one o'clock bulletin on 4th December 1995, presented by Jean-Claude Pernaud. The first report dealt with the inconveniences faced by the small traders in Marseilles and Lyon because of the strike. Orders didn't arrive and neither did the customers. Bastard strikers! The second report dealt with Parisian travellers forced to use the D system. 'We've been taken hostage' stated the specially chosen interviewees. Bastard strikers! The third and fourth report were about the private bus lines set up in Melun (Parisian region) and the desert of improvised stations of the private boat companies all along the Seine. Thank you kind government, glory to the strike breakers! The fifth report was about the problems caused for workers in the private sector because of ... not the bosses but the strike. There was a spectacular intro from the spokesman Pernaud, 'several hundreds of thousands of workers in the private sector are the only ones to pay the costs of the strike'. The sixth report asked the question: 'Are government employees privileged?' This report is a must for an example of media manipulation. These bastard employees have enjoyed improved work conditions, so it is to be expected that they should slave away and club together for longer. In addition they have slave status security and their survival rate is indexed to the rate of inflation. What are they complaining about? The seventh report was about the ability of the elderly to survive the strike. Bastard strikers! The eighth report brought together the complaints of post office users in Toulouse because of the strike. And these bungling idiotic postal unionists have the nerve to criticise the illegal postal centres which have been set up by the post office management which is employing workers who have no security. Bastard strikers! Finally the ninth and last report looked at a non-striking university – ah! finally real students

who work and don't complain – as it happens Paris-Dauphine. It's now 1.27pm, the news is over and we go on to the weather forecast. Bastard journalists!

### ***No reason to excited***

The government is negotiating with the French railways unions. The railways workers are at the backbone of the movement and if they come to a consensus with the government, the movement might break. This is why the government chose to discuss with them. The union leaders, especially Force Ouvriere, also seem rather ready to negotiate with the government and compromise. The leader of the latter union has already hinted, in his language, that he was ready to do so. On the other hand, it seems to me quite clear that the mass of strikers do not want any compromise in which they would lose some essential demands; and the major unions are looking for a conflict situation (!). The government is, of course, backed by the financial establishment (the franc is higher since the Prime Minister decided those measures) and approved by London, Bonn, etc. But there are also many people who are not striking and whereas some are very strongly against the strikes, others have mixed feelings, sympathise with the strikers although they go on working. This is not really a social crisis but what the French call a 'ras-le-bol', that is to say that they are fed up with all what is asked from them. The stupid thing the Prime Minister did was to ask everything at a time instead of demanding things from one group after the other. The several social groups then discovered that they had the same problems. For the time being, even if the strike is one of the most important since World War Two, this does not mean that people are making any revolutionary demands. As we know, the importance of a movement has no relation with its radical character. And the union leaders are still, presently, accepted by their troops, although there are signs that they might be compelled to follow the more radical grassroot militants. This is the case of another important union, the CFDT, in which some of the leaders have desolidarised with their head, who declared that she was satisfied. Therefore, although it is too early to predict any outcome, there are no reasons to get very excited for the time being. There is no reason to despair or to hope, but plenty of arguments to continue the fight. In this era of acceleration of history, every hour may see the world changing.

### ***The unions are still the brothels***

Louis Viannet is the leader of the communist trade union in France

– the CGT. In this position he is at the head of the union whose membership contains large numbers of people who have been on strike for nearly three weeks and in particular the railway workers who have brought about a wave of industrial unrest which is paralysing France.

The opinion polls in France – for what they are worth – show that the French people fully support the strikers and yesterday they showed their support by taking to the streets. The Unions put the figure at around 2,000,000 whereas official figures grudgingly admit to 1,000,000. As we have pointed out before these figures need to be seen in the context of lack of transport making it hard for people to get to the demonstrations. And despite the disagreements as to who turned up all are agreed that these are the biggest demonstrations to be seen in France since the second world war.

So given this situation where labour seemingly has the state by the throat what exactly does M. Viannet want? Last Sunday he told us: a meeting with the prime minister.

No sooner asked for than granted and so on Monday Alain Juppé sat down individually with the union leaders in the beginning of what is to be seen as a process of ‘dialogue’. M. Juppé has nothing to lose by talking to M. Viannet and his ilk. Now the spectacle can begin. The next stage is for a ‘round table’ conference bringing all the ‘interested parties’ together. So we can expect to see the CGT sit down with the bosses so they can work out an ‘honourable agreement’ so that France can get back to ‘normality’.

We can begin to see the danger which is coming directly from the trade unions. For they know as well as anyone that M. Juppé has nothing to offer them.

He has so far offered a couple of small concessions to the railway workers in the hope of being able to prize them away from the movement which is growing around their action. But M. Juppé’s agenda is essentially other than this. The process of European economic integration has set its sights on a single currency to be in place by the end of the century. For this to be achieved the French State knows that it will have to get its budget deficit down from where it currently stands (5%) to where it needs to be to satisfy the demands of Maastricht (3%) and even the savage proposals he has already put forward which France is up in arms against will only deal with 1% of the required 2% gap. M. Juppé – despite nice cozy chats with ‘communists’ – has no choice. Within the liberal framework which the communists want a part of we are talking austerity programmes like France has never seen before.



As we say, it is the attitude of both sides that an agreement 'must be reached' and it is to be expected that this 'dialogue' will be the agenda in the establishment media over the next few days/weeks. But there is a nagging doubt at the back of M. Viannet's mind and he shares it with M. Juppé. When the agreement is reached what if the workers refuse to return to work? What if the union leaders lose control of their membership? What if the workers take control of their own strike instead of being mere consumers of the media spectacle? The answers to such questions for both M. Juppé and the CGT leadership borders on the unthinkable and smells of anarchy.

Let's hope the people when they make their choice (and it is theirs) consider carefully who can best represent their interests. The answer is of course that it is they themselves and they alone. Instead of dialogue they need to up the ante: the next stage will have to be occupations on a massive scale.

### *How to please the people*

A million took to the streets in France on Thursday. Even the French state has admitted that it might not be able to hold out if the figure doubles and was making much of the fact that in Paris only (sic) 50,000 turned out.

In fact this figure represents the success of the actions taken so far which largely started and still continue in the transport sector preventing not only the economy from functioning but also, to a degree, stopping people from getting to the demonstrations. There is still no rail service in France and in Paris there is no public transport system. Bus and Metro services are also at a standstill in Bordeaux, Grenoble and Limoges and are severely disrupted in most other provincial cities. The airports are also severely affected operating at about half capacity in the capital where also any attempt to move on the roads will be prevented by up to nine mile traffic jams ... and still a million were on the streets.

The response of the French State has been predictable. One of the worst outbreaks of violence occurred in the East of France yesterday (8th December) when striking coal miners were forced to defend themselves against the riot police. Several were injured in events where the police used batons and tear-gas against miners who had little more than sticks with which to defend themselves.

The other attack comes from a more overt political direction. The media in France has successfully narrowed down the scope for debate to the argument over whether there should be 'debate' (the state wins) or 'negotiation' (the unions win) whereas the reality

would seem to be that the stakes are far higher with the winners or losers to be either labour or capital.

Capital has tied its flag firmly to the European Union and the lure of the single currency, the mechanics of which mean 'another round' of cuts and austerity programmes. Five years ago the 'Union' represented a market of 600,000,000; in five years time it will be 6,000,000,000 and if united in any way by a single currency will represent the exploiters' dream.

The interests of the people of Europe are other but will depend largely within this context as to how far they can socialise the question and move away from a simple economic framework in order to start building a society worthy of that name. Identifying too closely with the unions will be their downfall. The State has now announced the appointment of a 'mediator' (NB: not dialogue or negotiation) in a clear move to divide the strikers. The State has identified the railway workers as the key figures and wishes to lure them back to work in order to break the people's resolve. The union leaders think they have the bit between their teeth with the leader of the Socialist Force Ouvriere, Marc Blondel, predicting bigger marches next week, starting with a day of action on Tuesday. 'The Government', says M. Blondel, 'has to find a way of pleasing everyone'.

M. Blondel surely understands the nature of government better than to believe his own rhetoric. The only way the government will succeed in finding a way of pleasing the people would be for it to disappear up its own arse.

#### 4: EPILOGUE

##### *Under the paving stones, nothing ...*

Like everyone else we had learnt that a social movement was forming in France, that folk were opposed to the Juppé plan and the general daily misery ... We wanted very much to shout out our rebellion and our concern as unemployed people who will never benefit from a few pension points.

We even believed that some were waiting to see the re-emergence of May '68 with its barricades, its riots, its riot police and its paving stones ... and we wondered if it would change anything. So we decided to demonstrate with the railway workers and the government employees who would surely get less turkey and stuffing this year, given that they had less money.

So in a Dunkerque that had been seized by the winter cold, amidst

a crowd of more than 10,000 demonstrators we had wanted to shout our rage against that bastard Juppé. So that day we came along with our fellow workers ...

Soon we found ourself between the group from the nuclear power station at Gravelines and the CFDT customs officers section, for sure we weren't in the right place! We dropped back looking for our anticapitalist, antispecist, libertarian anarchopunk comrades. Nothing. Not even a black flag flapping in the winds of revolt.

So we followed this long procession of union folk with the ever so revolutionary slogan: 'Bastard Juppé, the people want your head'. (In fact he has nothing to worry about, he can sleep easy, old Juppé).

We were disappointed, no May '68 on the horizon, not even a riot cop, not even a paving stone, not even a clenched fist, just a few insanities shouted at the French Prime Minister, stupid teachers acting like it was the school fête, a few crackers and some whistles for a carnival atmosphere and a nice little song from Michel Fugain (Is he in the CGT?): "Pin a red ribbon to your heart / a flower of a bloody colour / if you really want things to change / get up now is the time".

Those few students who were present didn't seem impressed, it's hardly gonna appeal down at the NRJ mega-dance.

And then we walked a few kilometres, as you do, in a very 'behave yourself' atmosphere, our comrades from the CGT-SNCF up front and our firefighting comrades all in red but not necessarily with the CGT bringing up the rear. And then we went home coz it was getting dark and we had to put the supper on.

There were three big demos like that, a good 10,000 sung the jolly 'red ribbon' song and put about stickers of their favourite unions. The rubbish piled up in the streets and according to the local baker a few rats have been seen in the local primary school ... what a disappointment, there will be no May '68, no barricades, no clenched fists.

Well, so that folk could try to make sense of it all, we had a concert evening down at the Rues du Monde Association. After the concert given by Roodcoool and Ko, political songs with a smashing bazouki, we had a debate entitled: 'What now?' It was then that we learnt from the few militants from the LO and the CGT who had squatted the debate that we were gonna get the bosses, take over the factories have a big revolution and get rid of imperialist, liberal, right wing capitalism.

Well, after all that we were beginning to wonder if we really wanted a May '68 coz with unionists like that it wasn't gonna be much fun.

After the turkey and the stuffing and best wishes from the

President of the French Republic and the cake at epiphany there was still no revolution. Well of course we are not in any great hurry but we have no plans to wait for the year 2017 so we decided to set up a collective against exclusion. And the next social movement: we'll do it all ourselves.

"Christopher Logue, poet laureate of the Left,  
asked earnestly what we in Britain could do:  
that, said Cohn-Bendit wearily, is your problem.  
Kenneth Tynan, in a kimono shirt, kept inquiring how  
rebellion could succeed without army support.  
Among iconoclastic cheers, Cohn-Bendit resorted to  
(Anglo-Saxon) four-letter words. You felt, breaking free of  
the shambles, that the only thing our Fidelistas will be  
able to do with paving stones is drop them on their feet."

*The Guardian, 13th June 1968*

## Philip Sansom

### Revolution Adjourned

For days France teetered on the edge of revolution. May we be forgiven for saying that it was the absence of a substantial anarchist movement there which enabled the bourgeoisie to pull it back?

Revolutions are like lettuces – for best results they must be kept growing quickly without check. In France the incipient revolution had the greatest pest of all to check its growth – the big fat rats of the Communist CGT who ate away at the roots.

For all the ingredients were there the moment the industrial workers joined the students in mass protest, strike and occupation of the factories. It would not have taken much to have turned the general strike into a social general strike and to have turned that into a social revolution – had that in fact been what any sizeable section of the anti-Gaullist forces wanted.

But was it? It was certainly among the students that the most revolutionary ideas were to be found. Correspondents tell us of the high level of heated discussion which went on day and night in the Sorbonne and the entire Latin Quarter – discussion interspersed with action in the bitter nightly battles with the hated CRS.

It may be said that when you are actually on the barricades it is a bit late to be trying to clarify your ideas – but no doubt the students *en masse* were just as surprised at what they were doing as anybody else. This is how it is with your actual spontaneous revolution. We may be quite sure that Daniel Cohn-Bendit and his forty comrades in Nanterre whose action first sparked the whole thing off could have had no idea that they would end up with eight million workers on strike, the economy at a standstill and de Gaulle, if not on his knees, at least toppled from his pedestal and made to face the seething unrest beneath the surface of his State.

For this has been the great surprise for the world and perhaps even for the French people themselves: the extent of discontent, even of hatred for the regime, that exists under the surface of an apparently stable and orderly society. And the great achievement of the French students has been to bring this out into the open, to carry their own struggle into the factories and workshops, to offer a great gulp of fresh air to the French workers and deliver a great kick to the fat backside of French bourgeois society. The regime, even if it survives the General Election, can never be the same again. Some degree of student control must be allowed in the universities, some degree of

hope, if nothing else, must persist for the French workers.

For it is the workers who are in the sorriest plight. Contrary to Marxist mythology, the industrial workers in modern industrial countries are not – and never have been – the spearhead of social revolution. They should be, perhaps. They could be, certainly. But having been sold on reformist trade unionism, they are given no encouragement by their own organisations to think in terms of responsibility, of workers' control.

In France their condition is even worse than in this country. Here, for political reasons, the Communists will agitate as an opposition to the reformist unions; there the Communists are the reformist unions. The counter-revolutionary role the Communists have played in many revolutions has never been more perfectly exemplified than in the events in France these last three weeks, and the only comforting thought that can emerge from this is that surely they must now be completely discredited among all those French workers who were prepared to occupy their factories and shops – for what?

***If they had taken over!***

It was at the point of the occupation of the factories that the revolution was almost on. When the Bourse was fired; when the students began to change their tactics from mass confrontation to smaller, guerrilla-type sorties to wear down the police and as a result the police began to show signs of disaffection and the Civil Service began to crack up, and de Gaulle apparently just sat and sat – then, if the occupation of the factories had swung into operation of the factories by the workers; if they had demonstrated their ability to organise their work without their bosses, if revolutionary co-ordinating councils had emerged to run the economy, distribute goods, maintain services – then the social revolution would have been on! If! If!

But no. Just as the petrified leaders of the TUC in the British General Strike of 1926 went to talk to King George V, so the slimy Communist leaders of the CGT went to talk with Pompidou – and came back triumphant with ten per cent!

Surely no-one imagined the workers would accept this? But it was not primarily intended for acceptance. It was no more than a talking point – a means towards taking the strikes off the boil, to give the politicians time to put their clammy hands over the hot aspirations of the people.

And so it worked. Everything went off the boil. The students took a hell of a beating and calmed down, the workers sat and sat and the

politicians waited. Having been served by the unions perfectly, de Gaulle chose just the right moment and jumped. With a show of force, and just the right bait – a General Election! – to cool all but the ‘extremists’, like the cunning old cat he is, he jumped. And that was it.

But we are sure the lessons of 1968 will not be lost. The sincere revolutionaries among the students will have learnt valuable lessons of tactics and theory; the workers will have seen where their real friends lie; the divisions between intellectuals and workers must have closed, between them and the politician/trade union bureaucrat widened.

What of the anarchist movement? Well, isn’t it the same old story? Not enough anarchists among the workers! In all the student unrest around the world now anarchists are setting the pace – or at least anarchistic methods of direct action are having effect. The French event is the only instance we have so far of workers joining in a struggle with the students, and events show that there was not a sufficient leavening of anarchist workers to get the message of workers’ control across in the way that student power has been put across.

### *The task before us*

It is of course a different set of problems. The bourgeoisie may moan about having to pay taxes to keep hooligan students in grants, but radical tampering with the economy at factory floor level is a really serious matter. Furthermore the workers themselves are not interested in ideas as the students are, and they are much more bogged down with the ‘responsibilities’ of domesticity, with noses to the grindstone and only superficial leisure activities as relief.

Nevertheless the task is before us as it has always been: the creation of a widespread anarchist movement in all levels of society; the creation of an anarcho-syndicalist movement in industry to educate workers in revolutionary aims and tactics so that the maximum advantage can be taken of any situation whenever the opportunity presents itself; the creation of an anarchist international for mutual aid across the frontiers.

One thing the French students and workers have done. They have put revolution back on the agenda in Western Europe. It is not over yet – it has simply been adjourned.

(taken from *Freedom*, 8th June 1968)

## Nicolas Walter

### Thirty Years After

*The Love Germ* by Jill Neville (Verso, paperback £9)

*The Beginning of the End* by Angelo Quattrocchi and Tom Nairn (Verso, paperback £9)

*1968: Marching in the Streets* by Tariq Ali and Susan Watkins (Bloomsbury, £20)

One of the strongest and strangest phenomena in human affairs is the substitution of imaginary for real concerns – what is variously called displacement, projection, idolatry, fetishism, and so on. The worship of images of various kinds avoids the need to deal directly with reality, in religious, political, social, economic, and personal life. In our allegedly rational society, this is expressed in especially irrational ways – obsession with so-called sport, glorification of so-called singers, sanctification of so-called icons, celebration of the so-called millennium, commemoration of so-called anniversaries. On the political left, it has recently appeared in such bizarre ways as resurrecting the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* because it happened to have been published 150 years ago, or recalling the so-called ‘events’ in France because they happened to have occurred thirty years ago.

In the case of the former, a bundle of new editions and commentaries have been produced by several publishers, all rather absurdly attempting to prove that what is essentially an interesting historical document still has genuine contemporary relevance. In the case of the latter, Verso, the book-publishing imprint of the old *New Left Review*, has produced expensive paperback reprints of two books which would have been better forgotten. Jill Neville was a delightful person who somehow preserved the spirit of the Sixties better than anyone else until her death last year, but she was not an important writer and *The Love Germ* is not an interesting book. It is little more than “a *La Ronde* of VD”, as one of its character says. The plot consists mainly of a series of silly people passing gonorrhea to one another through rather joyless sexual encounters, and the scene consists mostly of Paris in 1968. The people are cardboard caricatures, and Paris is a cardboard backdrop. There is some slight documentary flavour in the occasional political dialogue, rather



spoil by the misspelling of many of the proper names (e.g. 'Makno'), and there is some neat epigrammatic writing, rather wasted on such a thin story. There is a new preface by Fay Weldon, rather factitiously emphasising the feminist moral of the book.

Angelo Quattrocchi was living with Jill Neville in Paris in 1968 and was the model for the extremely unpleasant central male character of the anarchist Giorgio in *The Love Germ*. His rhetorical journalistic account of the events was quickly published together with Tom Nairn's portentous Marxist analysis of them as a cheap paperback with the silly title *The Beginning of the End*. The trouble is that there have been several far better descriptions and discussions of the subject, especially in French, and the revival of this particular book is not kind to either author. Quattrocchi had nothing sensible to say, either fictionally in *The Love Germ* or actually in *The Beginning of the End*. Nairn, who was himself involved in the rebellion at the Hornsey College of Art at that time, had all too much to say, and most of it now reads more like a sectarian religious tract than a serious political text. There is a new preface by Tariq Ali rather desperately attempting to establish the book's significance, both past and present, but the hard fact is that what happened wasn't even the end of the beginning.

Tariq Ali himself has produced a dozen insignificant political books during the past 30 years – from the Trotskyist *New Revolutionaries* (1969) and *The Coming British Revolution* (1972) through the apologetic *1968 and After* (1978) to the autobiographical *Street Fighting Years* (1987) – followed by a series of embarrassing novels. He and Susan Watkins have now produced *1968: Marching in the Streets*, which he describes as "simply a political calendar of 1968", in effect a picture book of each month of that year. There is an ambitious journalistic commentary, which is full of facts and illustrations and is very well designed and rather well written, but it is marred by such carelessness as a ludicrous reference to "Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee" or a wildly inaccurate account of the origin of May Day (which manages to suppress the anarchist aspect of the events in Chicago in 1886-1887 – not 1899), and it is ruined by the ideological idiocy which confuses every kind of so-called revolutionary activity on the so-called left. The rebels of Paris and Prague are somehow identified with one another and also assimilated with the dictators who then ruled (and still rule) Cuba or North Vietnam, a clown like Mick Jagger is taken seriously for writing 'Street Fighting Man', and an agitator like Tariq Ali himself is mentioned without any comment.

Much of the commentary is taken from *Black Dwarf*, a Marxist paper of the time, and the revival of these pieces is not kind to any of their authors. The book is pervaded by a naive and sentimental view of revolt which encourages warm feelings but discourages clear thought.

A great deal of documentation is provided about radical movements around the world, but confidence in its reliability is shaken by the distorted historical perspective, which depends on Marxist formulas (although Tariq Ali seems to have abandoned his former fundamentalism), and by the selective coverage of radical activity in Britain before he came on to the scene, ignoring the anti-militarist movement which preceded his efforts (and which he helped to sabotage). He condemns "the absurd posturing and infighting of far-left sects, each claiming the mantle of Lenin or Trotsky or Mao", without alluding to his own part in this activity (in one or other of the Fourth Internationals), and he condemns "mindless, sub-anarchist hostility to the state", without considering the applicability of this attitude to many of the events of 1968.

Tariq Ali, contradicting Karl Marx, says that "history does not repeat itself, either as tragedy or farce"; but it does, as fetish. One of the most serious omissions from 1968: *Marching in the Streets* is any consideration of the ideas of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* or *Internationale Situationniste* or *Noir et Rouge* groupuscules, the mainly French organisations of libertarian revolutionaries which said the most penetrating things before, during and after 1968 (and some of which were cited at the time by Quattrocchi and Nairn). From their perspective, this book is not a manifesto or even a memorial, but a mere spectacle – rather like all the books on Princess Diana. The real situations lie out there in the real world of daily life and the individual and collective struggle for autonomy and autogestion, far from the fantasy worlds of sub-Marxist radical chic or of what may be called 'academia'.

The final judgement must be that there are things which are worth saying about the revolutionary or quasi-revolutionary events of thirty years ago – as about the revolutionary or pseudo-revolutionary movements of the past 150 years – but that none of these books says any of them. Their significance, so far as they have any, is as symptoms of the intellectual bankruptcy of the European left and the political vacuity of the British media.

**A shortened version of this review was published in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* on 26th June 1998**

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## Harold Barclay

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**Harold Barclay** obtained his PhD at Cornell University in 1961, and lectured in anthropology at the University of Alberta from 1966 until 1988. Prior to that he taught at the American University of Cairo and the University of Oregon. He is the author of *People Without Government: an anthropology of anarchy*, as well as books on the Arab Sudan, the Middle East and, though his interest in agriculture, the role of the horse in human culture.

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